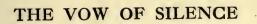




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# THE VOW OF SILENCE

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TO MY SON



## THE VOW OF SILENCE

## CHAPTER I

The village schoolroom was packed. Combined odours of heavy-breathing humanity, hair oil, and ill-trimmed lamps thickened the dusty atmosphere; not only was the village well represented among the audience, but contingents were present from outlying parishes and hamlets. The roadway was blocked with various vehicles, from a couple of motor-cars down to donkey-carts; bicycles were propped against the building, and in the porch was a collection of lanterns, umbrellas and goloshes, the property of those who had arrived on foot from any distance, seeing that, though midsummer, the night was threatening and dark.

The attraction was an address to be delivered by a representative of a well-known Religious Society, and the tall, thin stranger who took his place beside the chairman (the

local Vicar) received a hearty welcome. Farther back on the platform sat a little row of supporters. In picture-paper language, "reading from left to right" came first the Vicar's wife; she was his second wife, and exactly what a vicar's second wife should be -not young, smooth hair turning grey, and a plain, sensible countenance. Then her three stepdaughters; the two elder were twins, and resembled curiously their stepmother, the likeness being enhanced by all three wearing pince-nez and dark silk blouses. The youngest sister, many years the youngest, formed a bright, conspicuous spot in the sombre row by reason of her youth, her pink cheeks, her bright eyes that needed no glasses and her halo of fair hair, though her white frock was obviously home-made.

Next, the Squire of the neighbourhood, an elderly bachelor who had a reputation for learning and was famous for his library of rare Eastern books. With him his guest, a college friend of his youth, on leave home from India, a heavily-built man, bearded, sun-tanned, who peered about him short-sightedly through gold-rimmed spectacles, but his gaze ever reverted

sideways to the face of the Vicar's youngest daughter as they all sat waiting for the lecture to begin.

The Vicar stood up, cleared his throat, and tapped the table upon which stood the species of water-bottle and glass peculiar to lecture tables and wash-hand stands.

"My friends," he began, "we are gathered together this evening to listen to one who has laboured unceasingly far afield in the cause of Christianity—far afield in that great country India which has been committed by the Almighty to our charge, a land of spiritual darkness, a land that craves our sympathy and aid. It is our bounden duty to do all in our power to help release these unfortunate people from the trammels of idolatry and devilworship, and this can only be accomplished by the most strenuous effort and self-sacrifice on the part of those to whom this great work is entrusted. Therefore we who stay at home must support with our prayers and our contributions those who give their lives to this task. I ask you to think of their sacrifice, their exile, the hardship of existence amid a people and surroundings so entirely apart from

our own experience. These heathen people call to us from across the ocean for enlightenment and knowledge, beseech us in dumb anguish of soul to send them the message of truth and light. Oh! the voiceless cries of India that can only be conveyed to our ears by those who know, who have witnessed the tyranny of idolatry and the suffering it brings to those helpless masses. You, my friends, who are blessed in being brought up in the truth, can help to send the message of peace and hope to our benighted brothers and sisters of the East, and I am sure when you have heard from the lips of our guest how vital, how important, is the work upon which he and his devoted colleagues are engaged, you will bestow freely and gladly all the help that lies in your power to give."

The applause that greeted this introduction was not quite so wholehearted or universal as the Vicar could have desired, possibly because it appealed as much to the pocket as to the emotions; but the speaker when he rose was acclaimed adequately, and the address began. It was an eloquent and impassioned address, delivered by one who knew well how

to present the horrors of paganism, the grossness of nature worship, the sufferings of women and children beneath the power of Eastern customs, and the vindictive persecution of would-be converts to Christianity by their relations. He painted lurid pictures of demonism, human sacrifice, and the lowest forms of idolatry that accepted God as the devil and the devil as God; dwelt upon the pitiable ignorance among the people, only an exceedingly small proportion of whom, he said, were able to read or write. He denounced the so-called priests of the temples who exploited the fears and superstitions of their followers for their own greedy ends; and he horrified his listeners with accounts of "devil worshippers," or "Yogis," whose idea of a holy life was self-immolation—hideous beings who went about practically naked, smeared with ashes. He told how some buried themselves up to their necks in the earth, how others lay on beds of sharp nails, or held their arms aloft till the flesh withered and the limbs became fixed, the nails growing through the palms of the hands; all enduring such unbelievable tortures in the mistaken conviction that by such revolting

practices salvation could be attained. With his own eyes, declared the speaker, he had beheld such appalling objects; and the people, the poor misguided people, gave these parasites alms and food from their slender resources, even worshipped them as deities incarnate in the belief that by so doing they would acquire blessings and good fortune, or rather, perhaps, avert curses that they believed might blast their lives. . . .

Then came the brighter side of the subject —hopeful statistics proving the progress of Christianity, descriptions of schools and colonies for converts, anecdotes of sweet little orphans, and gentle girl-widows, who drank in the truth and were ever so grateful and happy under the care and instruction of the English ladies who had devoted their lives to the cause. Education too was making strides among the boys, such quick, eager little fellows; and he caused laughter among the audience by quoting some of their funny remarks and questions. Instances were also cited of important individual victories won by missionary effort— - for example, the rescue of a girl who had been " married to a dagger," thus dedicating her to

a life of immorality; and how a devil-dancer at the age of sixty-five had recognized the wickedness of his ways after hearing a sermon preached in the bazaar and had become a valuable helper to the local mission. The speaker only regretted that time would not permit of his giving many more such cheering illustrations from his own experience; and all this despite the uphill fight, the obstructions and discouragements, the trials and troubles that met the servants of God at every turn in the East.

"In the words," he concluded, "of our immortal poet Tennyson:

'A slow developed strength awaits Completion in a painful school.'"

The Squire's guest, the man home on leave from India, listened with attention throughout the address. Now and then he smiled reflectively. Had the meeting taken the form of a debate he might perhaps have pointed out that the lecturer had ignored the fundamental difference between Eastern and Western habits of thought and mental attitude, had spoken entirely from a European standpoint, regardless of history or hemisphere; had not

touched upon the origins of the primitive beliefs he had described; that he had passed over the stupendous power of a vast and elaborate social and religious system prevalent, with but partial alteration, for at least three thousand years, that was still a living force, despite the incrustations and impurities that had crept in with the ages, though all the nations of Europe had changed their religions in a far shorter space of time. . . . He could have told the gathering that India was not, as might have been inferred from the address, populated solely by an ignorant, uncivilized race hardly removed from savagedom, whose creed was no more than the darkest superstition, worshippers of sticks and stones, who systematically ill-treated their wives and frequently murdered their children. Demonism and cruelty existed-that was all true enough, and in such a field of battle lay the chief chance of success for mission forces; but no mention had been made of the thrift and the patience and the sobriety of the masses, their innate sense of family responsibility, the simple pride that rendered workhouses and public charity unknown and unnecessary save in times of pes-

tilence and famine; their veneration for selfsacrifice however distorted; the important part that religious observance plays in every act of their daily lives. There was no admission of the fact that behind gross outward symbols and practices repulsive to the British mind lav worship of the great primeval forces of nature that regulate the world. . . . And further than that, what of the sacred writings, the grand old literature of India, with their noble thoughts and lofty sentiments, through which the power of a Supreme Being was acknowledged in the forces of nature as actual manifestations? It was clear that the speaker either knew nothing of these profound and spiritual teachings, or else had deliberately ignored them.

The man from India sighed as applause followed the conclusion of the lecture; it was a sigh of regret that the majority of these ardent disciples of Christianity should not realize the value of any attempt to fathom the Hindu mind which, in his opinion, could only be accomplished by the study of Sanscrit; and his thoughts wandered off into the maze of Indian creeds and customs, to all that was good and true in the Hindu systems of beliefs. Like

the apostle to the Gentiles, he would have urged them not to shut their eyes to anything just, pure, honest or of good report, that if there be any virtue, if there be any praise due, to think on these things. Mentally he quoted the words of a great student of Indian literature:

"Surely we ought to acknowledge and accept with gratitude whatever is true and noble in the Hindu character, or in Hindu writings, while we reflect with shame on our own shortcomings under far greater advantages."

Then he became conscious that a money-box was being shaken expectantly in front of him, and with hasty, apologetic response he dropped some coins through the slit. Some-one tapped him on the shoulder from behind; it was the Vicar's wife, and he gathered that he and his friend were invited to supper at the Vicarage. At first he felt dismayed; always he shrank from strangers, talking was an effort to him except in congenial company, and the kind of company he found congenial was rare. He glanced reproachfully at his friend who was talking to the Vicar.

Then again he caught sight of the sweet, pathetic face of the Vicar's youngest offspring, and the prospect of a distasteful evening became qualified. It crossed his mind vaguely that were he ever to marry he should welcome and adore just such a little daughter as that—and she looked so out of place among this solemn platform party, like a white butterfly surrounded by moths. He felt pity for her, wished he could give her pleasure—pretty child!

As they left the schoolhouse amid the general exit he heard the Vicar's wife speak sharply to her youngest stepdaughter. What she actually said he did not catch, but the girl's tender mouth quivered, her eyes filled with tears, and with a feeling of distress and protective indignation he attached himself to her, helped her to put on a shabby cloak, walked beside her across the road and through the Vicarage garden—actually manœuvred to sit beside her at the supper table.

But etiquette frustrated this intention, and he found himself placed between the Vicar's two elder daughters. Both plied him with questions about India. "The heat must be very trying; how do you stand it?"

"It is not hot all the year round in my part of India. The climate varies. India is a continent," he concluded hopelessly.

"Yes, of course. And are you much troubled with snakes?"

"I think I may say that I have not seen more than a dozen or so during my twentyfive years' service."

"Indeed? But the insects!"—with shudders.

"They are tiresome and destructive certainly."

"Do you employ Christian servants?"

"Not for choice."

"Oh!"—in reproachful chorus. "Why

"Well"—rousing himself with an effort, "they wouldn't get on with the other servants, and conversion is not common among the servant class in my Province, where converts are drawn principally from among jungle-folk and out-castes not suitable for domestic service."

"But surely "—incredulously—"they can be trained?"

"Yes, perhaps, in the future. In some parts of India English households are staffed entirely by native Christian servants—Madras, for example, where a large proportion of the people are descendants of Roman Catholic converts."

Expressions of surprised disapproval greeted this statement.

"You must remember," he went on wearily, "that India is a vast country. What is true about one part may be utterly false about another. It is impossible to generalize about India."

"But the heathen are everywhere!" said the lady on his right.

"Idolatry is rampant," said the lady on his left.

And together they added triumphantly: "There is no getting over that fact!"

Then, to his relief, they leaned forward that they might hearken to an agreeable discussion in progress between their stepmother and the lecturer on the subject of missions; the while he sat silent, his gaze wandering to the little girl at the farther end of the table.

Poor child! What a life must be hers

among these elderly, narrow-minded, though of course well-meaning people—her youth and her prettiness wasted! She was sitting silent, looked forlorn and pathetic, and so pretty! She gave a little yawn of sheer boredom, glanced up and caught his eyes fixed on her. They smiled at each other in mutual understanding. . . .

Driving back in his friend's car the man from India let himself go.

"What a crew!" he said resentfully. "They none of them knew anything at all about India with the exception of the fellow who lectured, and he took jolly good care to present only one side of the question, the side that suited his purpose——"

"What does it matter?" rejoined the Squire comfortably, lighting a cigar. "They don't do any real harm either here or out there, and it keeps them amused."

"They're killing that unfortunate child

<sup>&</sup>quot;What child? Oh! you mean little Elaine. Yes, she can't have much of a time. But there are thousands of pretty girls in the same circumstances all over England, bottled

up in the country, with no chance of escape unless they bolt, as they often do, with some man beneath them in class, and really one can't blame them when they do it."

"Poor little thing!"

"Well, why don't you marry her your-self?"

"I? Good heavens, I'm far too old; she might be my daughter."

"But she isn't! And I don't think you'd have much difficulty in persuading her people that you'd be a good match for the youngest born. It would be regarded as a piece of good luck! Think about it, old fellow. Stay on with me as long as you like, and make up your mind at your leisure."

"Preposterous!"

" Why?"

"Oh! I don't know. I've never thought of marrying."

"Think of it now."

"Why haven't you ever married?"

"Because I've never been smitten with pity and admiration for a charming young creature who was wasting her sweetness on the desert air!" "It does seem a sin."

"What?—that I should still be a bachelor, or that the unfortunate child, as you call her, should be left to wilt away and become a hopeless old maid, unless she elopes with the village blacksmith?"

"Oh! don't be an ass!"

The other chuckled. "This is what comes of taking you to a mission meeting! You'd better go and hear the Vicar preach on Sunday and escort him and his family back to the Court after the service. I've asked the whole boiling of them over to luncheon."

"I'm due at a meeting of the Asiatic Society on Friday night," grunted the man from India. "I shan't be here."

"Oh, yes, you will," said the Squire confidently; and as it happened he proved himself a true prophet.

## CHAPTER II

"Now that," pronounced the elder Miss Williams, "was what I call a most inspiring and enlightening address. How did it strike you, Harold?"

Harold Williams, walking between his two maiden aunts, after the meeting, towards their comfortable dwelling on the outskirts of the village, scented challenge and suspicion in the question, and perversely he refrained from admitting how deeply the lecture had impressed him.

He replied carelessly: "Oh! it was quite good—the fellow evidently knew what he was talking about."

It was only by chance that he had found himself a member of the audience this evening in the schoolhouse, having arrived during the afternoon on his bicycle to pay a flying visit to his aunts towards the end of his holiday tour. His home lay to the north in a small manufacturing town where he lived with his widowed

mother, more or less supporting her on his salary as a clerk in an insurance office.

In comparison with his home circumstances these two old aunts of his seemed to live in luxury. He knew the reason: it was because his father's marriage to a girl "connected with the playhouse" had been abhorrent to the Calvinistic mind of his grandfather on the paternal side, and the retired ironmonger had consequently bequeathed the whole of his savings to his two spinster daughters.

Harold's mother, however, had never abandoned the hope that his aunts might some day see fit to benefit their nephew substantially either during their lifetime or by their wills, and she had urged her son continually to "keep up with them—horrid old things though they were"; she had insisted on his sending them Christmas and Easter cards, made him write to them on their birthdays. He had spent one or two dismal holidays with them during his boyhood, and certainly they had gone so far as to contribute a small sum towards his education—all they could spare, as they avowed, after their subscriptions to Bible Missions had been paid. Beyond this he had

come little in contact with them, and for the last few years, since he had been earning his own living, he had seldom seen them.

To-day they had welcomed him kindly, even affectionately, so that he felt glad he had yielded to his mother's persuasion that he would "look them up" on his way home. Possessing a tender conscience, he had already begun to reproach himself for regarding them as a couple of selfish old humbugs who lived affluently themselves while allowing his beloved mother to lack pleasures and comforts that he could not supply.

But now Aunt Rachel's question, that seemed to him distrustful in its tone towards his religious opinions, roused his resentment, all the more perhaps because he had been stirred to his soul by the lecturer's eloquence and was feeling half frightened, half shy, of his own emotion.

"Of course, much of what the gentleman said was familiar to your Aunt Martha and myself," she continued, "as we have been so interested all our lives in foreign missions and the heathen. We have a great collection of literature on the subject, even some pictures in magazines of the dreadful devil-worshippers he described," she shivered, "though it is almost impossible to realize that they can actually exist. My dear Harold, how often have I and your Aunt Martha wished that you had shown an inclination to take up mission work! We can only give, whereas you might have done!"

"Supposing I had shown the inclination," retorted Harold rather truculently, "it would have been no use. For one thing I couldn't leave my mother——"

He paused, for they had arrived at the door of the old red-brick house with its rows of flat windows; and as they all stepped into a brightly lit passage hall that ran the full depth of the building, Aunt Rachel Williams looked at her nephew with attention, and sniffed.

"Ah! yes, your mother!" she said disparagingly. A creature whose godless beauty had shocked the instincts of the whole family with the exception of the one member who had weakly allowed himself to be ensnared by it!

Harold was so like what she remembered of his mother as he stood, hatless, beneath the big hanging lamp, a slight, delicate-looking youth with finely cut features and dark blue eyes; his mouse-coloured hair rippled close to his small, well-modelled head, and his lips were sensitive, curved. To the old woman who gazed at him critically his appearance was annoyingly effeminate; she saw no hint of the robust Williams stock about this young man; he might even, she thought with contempt, have been a girl masquerading in male attire. Why did he not grow a beard and look like a man!

Young Williams flushed angrily. At the moment nothing would have induced him to confide in his aunts that to become a missionary had been the dream of his life from his childhood. Perhaps in spirit he more nearly resembled his father's people than he did in body; certainly he had not inherited his religious inclinations from his mother, whose gay, irresponsible nature was often a trial to him, dearly as he loved her.

In silence he followed his relatives into the old-fashioned dining-room. Heavy rep curtains were drawn before the windows, the furniture was mahogany, all ponderous and highly polished, the chairs upholstered in horsehair; wax and woolwork ornaments under

glass cases stood on the black marble mantelpiece beneath a ferocious portrait in oils of Grandpapa Williams holding a Bible in his hand as though he were about to fling it at the head of some approaching disbeliever. To Harold, accustomed to cramped and inferior lodgings, the room appeared almost magnificent.

The table was spread for supper; the Misses Williams apparently considered that food for the body was quite as important as sustenance for the soul, for there was a large piece of salmon, a cold fowl, stewed fruit and cream, and a "shape" of many colours. "Table hospitality," as they called it, came a good first in their code of gentility, and they pressed second helpings on their guest who, fortunately, was hungry.

Harold enjoyed the meal and the glass of home-made gooseberry wine that concluded it. He listened with interest as his aunts discussed the entertainment in the schoolhouse, and not only the lecture, but the party on the platform. They were not above a little mild gossip.

"The Vicar spoke well," decided Aunt

Rachel. "I always think," she added, addressing her nephew, "he would have made such an excellent missionary—a good man, so unlike his predecessor, who was inclined towards papist practices, tried to start a surpliced choir, and wanted an organ. Not that we ever went to the church in those days, for our dear Mr. Theobald was alive and the chapel was well attended; but after he left us the congregation fell off and things became so unsatisfactory that the chapel was closed; and just then, luckily for us, the present Vicar took this living. Owing to his views we felt justified in going to church, though, of course, we do not stand up when he comes in and goes out."

"It is a pity he is so poor," interrupted Aunt Martha. "It is a wretched living and they have no private means. When he married again he ought to have chosen a lady with a little money of her own."

"Yes, instead of a high-school mistress with a temper and no heart! The village people do not like her; they say she is too inquisitive and interfering and that she is unkind to her youngest stepdaughter, though

she gets on well enough with the two elder sisters."

"But the little one is rather troublesome, Rachel. Don't you remember the scandal there was last winter when she took to meeting that young man in the evenings—what was his name now?—dear me! my memory is getting dreadful."

"Oh! you mean old Mrs. Thomson's grandson. Yes, of course, there was a scandal—a sergeant in the army—not even an officer! I don't know what girls are coming to nowadays. Luckily the whole thing was found out in time, and the Vicar wrote to his Colonel and got the young rascal recalled from his leave."

"That pretty young lady on the platform?" inquired Harold. Though absorbed in the address, he had been conscious of the little oasis in the solemn row on the platform.

"Now, Harold!" said Aunt Martha with a playful shake of her forefinger.

He blushed. "I only thought she looked different, so much younger than the rest of them," he explained.

"Quite so." Aunt Rachel accepted the

explanation indulgently. "There is a long gap of years between her and the other two daughters, though they look older than they are. That child cost the mother her life, and I fear the family will have trouble with her until she is safely married. I could not help noticing how she—well, one might almost say ogled that gentleman who came with the Squire—little minx!"

"For my part I thought it was rather that he kept looking at her," argued Martha. "And really one could not blame him; she did look very pretty. What a good thing it would be if he took a fancy to her."

"Not that old man!" protested Harold.

"Old man?" chorused the aunts indignantly. They declared the Squire's guest to be in the prime of life, though agreeing that perhaps his beard and spectacles gave a somewhat misleading impression; and they continued to worry the subject until they all rose from the table.

Then they went into the "parlour," a room (seldom used unless there was company) resplendent with ornately bound volumes arranged symmetrically on a round table in the

middle of the floor, brackets and mats and chairbacks in profusion, some really good china crowded into a handsome cabinet, and everywhere a multitude of small ornaments and knick-knacks that would have made for the success of any charity bazaar.

Aunt Martha rootled in a cupboard and produced a pile of pale green periodicals. Harold helped Aunt Rachel to set out a folding table, and they gathered round it to verify the lecturer's descriptions of the horrors he had witnessed in connexion with the dreadful "devil disciples" of India.

Here they were! Illustrations reproduced from actual photographs taken on the spot. The camera could not lie any more than the man who had beheld such scenes. A gaunt skeleton form, nearly naked, lying on a bed of long sharp nails; a hideous ash-whitened figure holding a withered arm aloft, fixed by time and evil determination in that position; a nightmare countenance that looked hardly human, protruding from a hole in the earth, with a deluded heathen approaching to place food in the gaping mouth; a procession of nude fakirs on their way to bathe in a sacred

river; such a wild, fanatical concourse, carrying banners, gorgon-like, fierce and disgusting, while the people were scraping up the dust over which the "holy" feet had passed and throwing it on their heads!...

There were many other interesting, if gruesome, examples of native religious customs.
One in particular held the young man's attention—a picture of a sacred pool with one or two
long, thick snouts visible on the surface of the
water; the explanatory letterpress told how the
pool was infested with crocodiles, worshipped
and fed by the priests and the people, and how
the reptiles frequently claimed victims from
among those who ventured to bathe hoping
thereby for salvation and the washing away of
their sins. Further, that the monsters were
even known sometimes to leave rivers and
pools and travel across country attacking
human beings who came in their way.

Horrified yet fascinated, Harold Williams gazed at the illustrations, listened, enthralled, while his aunts read aloud impressively the articles that enlarged on all these abominations. He thought, bitterly, that his life was wasted, that he should have been out there

helping to fight this devildom, aiding the helpless sufferers, the gropers after light and truth who were crying for protection and assistance —("Oh! the voiceless cries of India!")—and were so thankful when kind hands were held out to rescue them from the mire and the quicksands of idolatry. He gloated over groups of mission classes, clean-clad, happyfaced young people, their teachers smiling in their midst, with older converts also, who had had the courage to break free from debasing beliefs, so finding peace within the fold.

Reluctantly he tore himself away from the magazines when a tea-tray was brought in by the apple-cheeked girl, a village protégée of the aunts who was being inducted by them into the duties of a house-parlourmaid. This was the wind-up of the evening and, obsessed though he was with all he had learned in the last few hours, he enjoyed the strong beverage which, as Aunt Martha observed, was so much improved by "a judicious admixture of green."

The hot drink refreshed him, stimulated his brain, but it kept him awake as he discovered when, after accompanying the aunts round the house to make certain that no burglars were concealed within it and that all outside doors were securely bolted, he found himself alone in a spotlessly clean bedroom overlooking the common. Try as he would he could not get to sleep, and at last he rose, drew back the chintz curtains, and flung up the window, to lean out and draw long breaths of the warm damp air, fragrant with the scent of gorse and summer blossoms.

In the absolute silence he could listen to the clamourings of his own heart, let his ardent young fancy revel on "what might have been."

Surely he had been intended for mission work in foreign lands. He saw himself preaching, exhorting, before a host of upturned dusky faces. The East called to him, urged him, captivated as he had ever been by the dream that lay behind his prosaic distasteful existence, brightened only by his love for his mother—that dear childlike being who leaned on him so utterly, who would be so helpless, so miserable without him. Were it not for her—— Ashamed of the thought, he tried to stifle his longing, suffered keenly as

he held his head in his hands, his pulses throbbing, his imagination aflame.

The village church clock boomed out the hour of midnight; each stroke seemed to repeat the words "Go forth! Go forth!" But how could he go forth when he was bound fast, not only by the claims of affection, but by the lack of money as well? He blamed his aunts. If they had so wished him to become a missionary why had they not made such a career possible for him? With their means it would surely have been easy for them to come forward with the suggestion, and the requisite help. He would have accepted no more than the barest necessities for himself provided his mother did not suffer financially; but on the other hand, could any financial support have consoled her for the separation from her son? He did not even dare to pray that his desire might some day be granted, because freedom could only come to him through the death of his beloved mother. Nothing would ever tempt him to leave her.

No; he was helpless, doomed to a stool in an office amid uncongenial companions who used coarse language and called him "Fanny," whose chief topics of conversation were betting and girls. Gambling and swearing seemed to him wicked; and as for girls—— His thoughts wandered away to Milly Blake, the only "young lady" in whose company he felt at ease at such times when he went with his mother to "socials" and penny readings, or "took tea" with their friends. The Blakes lived in a very good house; only refined people were welcome at their table, for Mrs. Blake was very particular about what she termed "knife and fork etiquette."

Occasionally it had crossed Harold's mind that if he were in a position to marry, perhaps Milly Blake—— She was so gentle and modest, and his mother seemed to like her. It had not occurred to him that the liking might have been founded on the fact that, when they met, Milly said little, while his mother talked all the time. He wondered how Miss Blake would care to marry a missionary. She was very religious, sang in the choir, taught in the Sunday-school, and had a district. . . .

Then he sighed and left the window. He would never be able to marry any more than he could ever become a missionary, so what

was the use of thinking and upsetting his mind? He must try again to get some sleep, for he had a long ride before him next day. Bicycling to such an extent exhausted him, unaccustomed as he was to much exercise. He wished he had not tried this experiment of spending part of his short holiday rushing about the country; but his mother had thought it might do him good, "brush the cobwebs away" she had said, and also that it was such a good opportunity to visit his aunts. He was not sorry he had seen his aunts, but he would be heartily glad to get home and have a few days' rest and quiet before resuming his wearisome work.

He overslept himself next morning and descended guiltily to the dining-room to find that his aunts had finished their breakfast. It was a relief that they did not appear to be in the least put out by his unpunctuality. Coffee and fried bacon had been kept hot for him, a couple of brown new-laid eggs were selected from a little wooden rack on the sideboard and set to boil in an old-fashioned silver vessel timed by a sandglass. Indeed there was an air of benign excitement in the demeanour of the

two ladies, as though they had something of pleasant importance to impart to their lie-abed nephew.

They seated themselves one on each side of the fireplace as he began his breakfast, but despite the good fare he had little appetite; his head felt heavy and the atmosphere of the room was close, for the day was sultry, and not one of the three tall windows was open; the aunts distrusted fresh air.

"We have been considering," began Aunt Rachel, while Aunt Martha nodded and smiled, "whether it is not our duty, if you feel that way inclined, to make it possible for you to become a missionary. We had no idea until last night that you were seriously interested in these matters, and of course I need hardly say what satisfaction it gives us."

She paused expectantly, noting the effect of her announcement; naturally the poor boy was overwhelmed, rendered speechless with gratitude and surprise!

Harold Williams laid down his knife and fork, pushed away his plate. How could he swallow bacon, however delicately cooked, in face of such an agitating situation? He flushed, perspiration broke out on his forehead, and he looked helplessly from one aunt to the other.

"But," he stammered, "but—"

"You can understand," went on Aunt Rachel kindly, "that the expense will be considerable. You will have to go to a theological college and then take orders. But in such a cause your Aunt Martha and I are prepared to make sacrifices, and we feel sure you will do us credit, not disappoint us. Now, my dear Harold, what do you say?"

"My mother—" He could find no other words to utter at the moment.

"Your mother," repeated Aunt Rachel, and she made a valiant effort to exclude contempt and disapprobation from her tone, but she did not altogether succeed. "Your mother need not be worse off; we will make her an allowance, a suitable sum, so that part of the question need not trouble you. It comes within our plan, since we know that hitherto she has been more or less dependent on your salary." Again she paused expectantly.

Aunt Martha rose and extracted the two eggs from the boiler, blowing out the flame beneath it with the aid of a silver tube. "Exactly three minutes and a half," she said, as she placed the eggs in blue china cups.

To the unhappy youth it seemed more like three hours since this sharp temptation had been so suddenly sprung upon him. He sat miserably silent; a feeling of intense self-pity engulfed him. To use his own thoughts, what hard lines that he should have to let slip this great chance! It was within his grasp; he had only to say the word and his dream would come true, his longing be fulfilled. It all rested entirely with himself, and this fact increased his sense of bitter grievance against Fate, made everything harder. Conscience bade him be brave and refuse his aunts' generous offer, while passionate inclination urged him to please himself and take advantage of it. Something must be said, for Aunt Rachel was staring at him, awaiting his joyful acceptance. Nervously he cracked both the eggs that Aunt Martha had placed on his plate; his courage failed him, and in despair he played the hypocrite, prevaricated.

"It is so—so unexpected," he mumbled.
"I don't know how to thank you; I never thought——"

"You mustn't distress yourself," said Aunt Martha, fluttering about him. "It is quite in our power to do as we have suggested."

"Yes," barked out Aunt Rachel, "or we should not have made the suggestion."

"Would you—would you let me think it over?" he quavered.

"But why?" cried the aunts simultaneously.

"Well, you see, my mother"—he felt he was uttering what must seem to them a sort of parrot cry—"I should like to talk it over with her; she might feel hurt if I didn't."

Aunt Rachel stiffened. "That would be very unreasonable of her," she said severely.

"But, after all, she is his mother," interposed Aunt Martha, "and reference is due to her. It is not likely or thinkable that she would stand in his way, especially as we are willing to make it all so easy for them both."

"Of course she would not wish to stand in his way!" agreed Aunt Rachel, in a tone that implied the exact opposite of this assumption, "and I hope," she went on, addressing her nephew, "that if by any chance she should be so foolish and selfish as to raise any difficulties, you will have the sense and the strength of mind to override them."

Obviously Aunt Rachel was deeply disappointed. Her expression had changed from one of pleasant anticipation and pride in the prospect of launching a promising young relative on the sea of mission work, to that of suspicion and doubt.

Harold felt a traitor to both sides, but having started on this course of temporization he stuck to it.

"You see what I mean?" he said, appealing instinctively to Aunt Martha. "My mother and I have always been so much to each other, and I should not like to make any big decision without telling her first. But," he added desperately and untruthfully, "I am sure she will be as glad and as grateful as I am."

"Do eat your eggs," urged Aunt Martha. "They get hard if they're allowed to stand."

Hastily he devoured them, the while hardly conscious that he was doing so. Then he rose from the table and looked at the clock. What a mercy that he had to start early! In the

present circumstances he could not have faced another hour beneath his aunts' roof. It was bad enough to have to reiterate expressions of gratitude and assurances that he would write directly he arrived home and had seen his mother, until the moment came when he could mount his bicycle and ride off alone with his thoughts. He waved, from the road, to the two homely figures in caps and little white shawls standing at the front door, and wondered ruefully what would be their feelings when they received his letter!

## CHAPTER III

For the next three days Harold Williams bicycled madly, regardless of dust and distance, unmindful of the fine scenery through which he passed. His heart ached so sorely with the sacrifice he felt called upon to make that bodily fatigue counted for nothing, indeed he welcomed the physical weariness that overcame him as each night he put up in some wayside inn, too tired to think any more, and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Though he thus hastened on the road he dreaded the arrival at home, and even when he found himself on the outskirts of the town, he had not been able to decide whether he would tell his mother of the aunts' offer and pretend he did not wish to accept it, or merely write and refuse it without mentioning the matter to her at all.

Now he skimmed past the cemetery. Lucky dead! With all their trials and troubles at an end! And as he went by the grey walls that

surrounded the grounds of the local lunatic asylum he could almost have envied the inmates of the building; they at least could not be subjected to such trials as were his, removed as they were from all cares and responsibilities! He smiled grimly at his own cynical thoughts, pedalling on towards the row of small villas where he and his mother had lodged since his father's death.

When he dismounted to open the little creaking iron gate and walk up the few yards of flagged pathway that led to the door, he raised his eyes to the upper bow-window, expecting to see his mother sitting there as usual. She loved looking out of the window; when at home she hardly did anything else. She was not there; she must be out; and he remembered that he was not due to arrive till the next evening—he had travelled so much faster than he had realized at the time. Anyway, now he would have time to make up his mind.

Before he could knock at the door (front-door bells were unknown in the road) it was opened by their landlady's child, a little girl of eleven, afflicted with adenoids, who, out of school hours, helped with the work of the "let

compartments" as she called them. There was something that struck Harold as unusual about the child's expression, as though she had been roused from her habitual stolidity.

"Oh! Bister Williabs!" she exclaimed; and gave an agitated snore as he regarded her with sudden anxiety.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked sharply.

She looked over her shoulder and shouted: "Buther! here's Bister Williabs!"

Harold propped his bicycle against the open door, pushed past the child in the narrow passage, and raced up the staircase. Now he understood why his mother was not sitting in the bow-window. She was ill—perhaps dying! He went straight to her bedroom, his heart thumping wildly with fear. Mrs. Bumpstead, the landlady, was in the room; and there on the bed, fully dressed, lay his mother, his dear sweet little mother, her face chalk white, her pretty fair hair in disorder. Only that she was breathing, quick fluttering breaths, he would have felt sure she was dead.

Mrs. Bumpstead held up a warning hand. "S'sh!" she whispered. "Don't disturb

'er. It's 'eart, that's what it is. The doctor'll be 'ere in a shake. Vi'let run to fetch 'im—she's only just back—and 'e said 'e'd be along soon."

Quietly, swiftly, Harold stepped forward and dropped on his knees beside the bed in an agony of distress. How terribly helpless he felt! The room smelt of brandy; his mother's shoes had been removed, and her slim, stockinged feet rested against a stone hot-water bottle.

Good, kind Mrs. Bumpstead! She had done all in her power.

Something stirred at the foot of the bed; it was Pip, the little woolly white dog he had given his mother as a puppy on her birthday three years ago. Poor Pip! He seemed to understand that he must make no disturbance; he gazed at Harold with eager, miserable brown eyes, controlling the impulse to greet him. Harold was conscious that Mrs. Bump-stead still whispered in the background, and gradually he took in what she was saying—something about having found "Mrs. Williams, pore lamb! in a faint on the stairs. She was going along to tea up at Blakes'—a mercy

she had not started. It put her in mind of the way her great aunt 'Arriet was took, twenty years ago come this Michaelmas, all of a sudden-like, and nothing to be done. Now she come to remember it, she'd turned Mrs. Williams's mattress on Friday without thinkin', and that always did bring bad luck, though some folk would say it was only 'suspicion.'"

To Harold's relief a sharp knock at the front door brought this painful soliloquy to an abrupt end. Pip stifled a bark, and Mrs. Bumpstead tiptoed swiftly to the head of the staircase. It was the doctor, an old baldheaded man with a tired face; overworked, always in a hurry. He paid little attention to the terrified youth who rose as he entered beyond giving him a few short directions, while, after a quick examination of pulse and heart, he and Mrs. Bumpstead proceeded skilfully to undress the patient and get her between the sheets.

Then it seemed to Harold that the doctor sat for hours beside the bed, his finger on the blue-veined wrist, his gaze bent on the delicate face with its pale, parted lips and half-closed eyes. Each moment he feared to see the old man take his departure; but when he moved it was to write something on a piece of paper that he tore from his pocket-book and bid young Williams hasten with it to his dispensary.

When Harold returned with the medicine, breathless, full of foreboding, his mother was conscious; it was all he could do to restrain his tears, to conceal his joyful agitation, as she smiled at him weakly, put out her hand. His heart overflowed with thankfulness; she was better, she would live. What a Providence that he had hastened home, and so had a longer time in which to watch over her, take care of her, before he need return to his work! How sweet she looked, lying there on her pillows, like a faded fairy! A torturing remorse that he should ever, in the remotest degree, have felt her to be a barrier to the fulfilment of his desires, pierced his soul.

She made a petulant, gay little grimace as she obeyed the doctor and swallowed his nauseous dose; even the solemn, bald-headed old fellow succumbed to her charm, grinned, and patted her shoulder, told her jocosely to "be a good girl," and keep quiet till he came again next morning to see her.

With an almost imperceptible lift of his shaggy brows he drew Harold after him out of the bedroom. Together they descended the staircase, and stood in the narrow passage. "Vi'let" was there, holding the front door open, breathing noisily, agog with excitement. Harold held his breath, awaiting the doctor's opinion.

"What—what do you think?" he stammered.

The other shook his head. "Very little stamina," he said gravely; "heart trouble of long standing. She may last, but I can't say for certain at present."

"Is there any immediate danger?" Harold felt he was asking the question as though it had been dictated to him by some outside intelligence.

"There is always immediate danger in such cases. She is very frail." He spoke bluntly. What was the use of bolstering up false hopes? "Keep her warm," he added, "and give her the medicine, and—well, trust for the best."

Just after dawn next morning Harold Williams saw his mother die. Through the night he had sat at her bedside, holding her hand, tending her in every particular according to the doctor's directions. At one time she had seemed to rally to an extent that raised his high hopes, gave him warm comfort. Colour came back to her cheeks and she wanted to talk, asked him about the visit to his aunts -had they been horrid old things to him? He told her how they had welcomed him kindly, appeared pleased that he should have planned to see them, and had taken him to hear an interesting lecture in the evening; he also made mention of their gooseberry wine and new-laid eggs.

"And what did they say about me?" she inquired with a roguish glance of her blue eyes.

"They didn't exactly say anything," he replied evasively; and she laughed in amused comprehension.

A little later she grew tired, and a veil seemed to drop between them; her memory wandered, and she murmured intermittently of "parts" and "engagements," and sang feebly a few bars of a seductive little song.

Then she called to his father: "Harry! Harry! don't go!" she cried piteously. "I will give it all up. I care for nothing but you."

So it went on through the hours, spaced with little periods of silence, until she fell asleep; and Harold sat motionless, listening intently for her weak, irregular breathing. Hope left him, returned, sped away again. Inwardly he prayed and prayed that she might live, yet with small faith that his petition would be granted. He recalled how he had not dared to pray in that chintz-trimmed bedroom overlooking the common in his aunts' house. Was this a retribution for his selfish yearnings? How could be ever have allowed himself to feel regret that he should be tied to home life when it meant being with her! Remorse, selfcensure, tortured him; he wept bitterly, despairingly, suppressing the painful sobs that almost choked him.

The only being he loved on earth might be taken from him, and he felt that if this happened his would be the blame.

What did the heathen matter? Let them all perish in darkness could he only keep his darling mother here on earth! Who was he

to imagine that he was intended by the Almighty to save souls when his duty had lain here, close to his hand? Vanity, arrogance, desire for importance was the foundation of his egotistical dreams. Shame on him for a sinner in thought, if not in deed!

He looked round the common little lodging-house room that yet was imbued with his mother's dainty taste. The looking-glass, set in the best light, was draped with muslin tied with pink bows; the pincushion was covered with a remnant of brightly coloured brocade; a pretty petticoat, fashioned from an out-worn summer gown, hung over the back of a chair; a bunch of grasses and wild flowers artistically arranged in a tall earthenware jar stood on the mantelpiece. She had never relinquished her gaiety of spirit, never grumbled nor complained, though her life must have been drab and drear, so circumscribed. Always she had made little pleasures for herself, taken such pathetic interest in trifles, while behind it all lay her deep devotion to her boy. How happily they had laughed and played together; she was such a mimic—would "take off" Mrs. Bumpstead and "Vi'let," Milly Blake's mother, in all her refinement and gentility while lapsing at intervals into colloquial speech; even himself—yet without a trace of unkindness. It was all done with the instinct of a born actress.

Pip squirmed at the foot of the bed; he was very clean and fluffy and white; she must have washed him quite lately. Now he was creeping up, whimpering softly, trying to reach the little hand that lay on the coverlet.

Harold pushed him back gently. Poor Pip! How he adored his mistress! His dogheart was racked with sorrow; he knew—he knew! And when, as the dawn-light stole in at the window, he raised his muzzle and howled horribly, Harold knew also that death was with them, had entered the little chamber. Just one long sigh, one or two spasmodic movements, and the slender form on the bed lay still for ever.

The next few days passed for Harold as in a dream. The tired old doctor was hurriedly helpful and sympathetic, also the local clergyman. Mrs. Bumpstead forced him to eat his food and saw to his comfort, the while havering about various death-bed scenes she had witnessed, omens and signs of approaching calamity, acts that were charged with ill-luck; she could not forgive herself for having turned Mrs. Williams's mattress on a Friday. She wished "she hadn't never done it, but there," as she argued, "if it weren't done a-purpose that did ought to make all the difference. What did Mr. 'Arold think himself?"

Harold found it hard to think of anything, even of his own irreparable loss. He was conscious only of a dull mental agony that stupefied him. Mechanically he carried out the necessary arrangements, walked like a dummy behind his mother's coffin to her grave. The day of the funeral was sunny and warm, just what she would have enjoyed, but all round him seemed to be darkness impenetrable.

One thing that worried him vaguely was the behaviour of Pip. Like himself, the little dog was inconsolable, and nothing would induce him to leave the bedroom. He remained huddled up in a corner, refusing food, deaf to persuasions, and always staring, staring, his eyes following something round the room that no one else could perceive. Mrs. Bumpstead was for slapping him and dragging him downstairs, but Harold besought her to leave him alone; he knew how Pip felt: he would have liked to sit rigid himself in a corner and starve till he died. Daily for a week after his mother's death he placed water and food within Pip's reach, but neither was ever touched, and he could not bear to stay in the room and watch that slow, uncanny movement of the eyes that followed something round and about, something that only the dog could see.

Finally Pip died, there in the corner. Harold found him one morning lifeless and stiff, still sitting, still staring, but his eyes moved no longer. Vi'let asked tearful permission to bury him in the back garden, and she and some school friends spent a happy afternoon digging a grave, placing the little white corpse in a soap-box, and, with correct ceremony, conducting the funeral. They planted a wooden cross at the head of the mound, and covered the spot with flowers. . . .

So Pip was at rest, as well as his mistress,

and perforce Harold's thoughts turned to the future. He had been granted considerate leave from his work in the insurance office, but he had not yet notified his aunts of his mother's death; he shrank from writing the letter. No doubt they would at once urge him to prepare himself for mission work, and to entertain such a prospect at present savoured to him of disloyalty to his mother's memory. It would be like taking advantage of her death. . . .

Yet forcing its way up from beneath his grief, like an after-winter growth in heavy soil, his passionate desire made itself felt: there was no eluding it, he could not uproot it. In his dreams it recurred, in his waking hours it leavened his loneliness. . . .

"Go forth!" it clamoured. "Go forth!" and, do what he would, he was unable to combat the recognition that now he was free—that now, if the aunts held to their offer, the way, the wonderful, glorious way, was open to him; and after all to what better, what higher, what more useful purpose could he dedicate his life?

Finally he wrote to his aunts, gave them particulars of his mother's illness, her death,

and burial, adding a diffident, carefully composed paragraph to the effect that should they still feel of the same mind in respect to their offer of assisting him towards a missionary career, he should only be too grateful to take advantage of their generosity and endeavour to prove himself worthy of their kindness.

While awaiting the answer to this letter he frequented the headquarters of a certain Bible society in the town, having obtained permission to use the library. He gloated over mission reports, pamphlets and periodicals, memoirs and "lives" of latter-day martyrs to the Cause in the East, finding solace and an interest that was absorbing in these descriptions of work on the "field of battle"; how victories were won, barriers cast down, enemies overthrown. All the well-worn metaphors and similes appealed to his excited imagination, and the hours passed swiftly. . . .

He read again of Satan's disciples, the yogis and fakirs, the accounts of whose terrible practices held for him a singular fascination while filling him with indignation and disgust. And crocodiles, too! Why was

it that whatever pages he studied, whether of books or magazines, he invariably hit upon references to these loathsome reptiles that haunted the rivers and pools, claiming unhappy bathers who thus sacrificed their lives in a deluded seeking after salvation? Oh! if only that search could be directed in the right path, a path free from danger and terror, such a safe way, leading straight to the regions of glory and peace! What a blessed privilege for those who were permitted to help lead these poor ignorant souls into safety. That privilege, he hoped, felt sure, he was to share also in the future.

In due time came Aunt Rachel's reply to his letter, not quite so soon as he had anticipated, but, as she explained, it had been necessary for her and Aunt Martha first to communicate with their "man of business" with reference to immediate financial undertakings for his future. Now, however, she had pleasure in inviting him to come to them at once that matters might be discussed and decided without further delay.

Forthwith Harold resigned his situation in the insurance office, forfeiting a month's salary, gave a week's notice to Mrs. Bumpstead and bestowed upon her, reluctantly, his mother's slender wardrobe; arranged with the local auctioneer for the sale of their few bits of furniture; packed his clothes, and generally prepared to "go forth."

## CHAPTER IV

The evening before his departure Harold went to the cemetery, calling at a shop on his way to buy flowers for his mother's grave. He chose white and pink roses, blooms heavy with perfume; she had always so loved sweet scents. Also, without consideration of the cost, he purchased a handsome enamelled metal wreath enclosed in a glass case; the roses must die but this would last, and he could not bear to think of her grave unadorned in his absence. He felt sure she would have admired the arrangement of pure white camellias and dark green leaves that had such a chaste and reposeful appearance.

As he stepped out into the street, the roses in one hand protected by a cone of strong paper, the glass case under his arm, he met Milly Blake. In all his grief and preoccupation of mind he had forgotten her existence; now he remembered the beautiful cross of flowers with the card of condolence sent by the

Blake family on the day of the funeral, and felt ashamed that he should not have acknowledged it. What must the Blakes think of his manners! But Miss Blake looked at him sweetly and sympathetically as he managed to raise his hat, despite his encumbrances, and hold out his hand. Her hand, in a tight brown glove, felt very small and feminine as she laid it in his; it reminded him of his mother's, and he pressed it hard while a lump rose in his throat and he found it difficult to speak. He noted the delicate flush that rose in her pale cheeks, and he thought that her eyes, scantily fringed though they were with white lashes, resembled a dove's.

"You see," he said sadly, looking down at the roses and the wreath, "where I am bound for. I wonder," he added on an impulse, still holding her hand, "if you would have time to come with me?"

Gently she freed her hand to consult a gold watch that she drew from a little pocket at her waist.

"Oh, yes; yes, I think so." She hesitated, looked around. She was wondering what would be "said" were she to be seen

accompanying Mr. Williams to his mother's grave-side! It might give rise to gossip.

"Do come," he urged. "It would help me so much. She was very fond of you, you know."

She gave him a glance in which maidenly shyness was mingled with a genuine desire to comfort him. She liked him so much; and, after all, it would be cowardly and selfish to refuse his harmless request just because of possible public opinion! She felt very wicked and daring and independent as she capitulated, walking by his side towards the outskirts of the town, and the feeling (not at all disagreeable) was even unaccountably enhanced when they passed Miss Chipway, a middle-aged spinster renowned for her poisonous assumptions and uncontrolled tongue, who regarded them significantly and tried to stop them.

They repulsed her effectually with polite salutations, and Milly Blake could not help smiling as they continued on their way, though she recognized that she had laid herself open to scandal. Now it would be all over the place that she and Mr. Williams must be engaged. Well, there was no help for it, and perhaps—

who knew?—she might do worse, if she married at all. Mr. Williams was a steady, earnest young man, though socially, perhaps, not quite her equal. Yet she felt that his instincts were true and that he had inherited a certain form of originality and good breeding from his mother that gave him a measure of superiority outside her experience.

"What are your plans?" she inquired diffidently.

He felt glad to unburden himself to her of his plans for the future. "I think I am going to be a missionary," he announced, conscious of a glow of self-importance. "I have some relations on my father's side who are willing to help me. It will mean very hard work at some theological college, but it has always been the dream of my life to go to the East and fight idolatry."

"Oh! yes," she said eagerly. "I know what you mean. I, too, have always longed to help in that direction. But here I am helpless, bound to my people; what can I do?"

"That was my case until—until the other day. In such circumstances there is nothing

one can do but one's duty. Family ties and affection must come first."

"It seems hard," she said wistfully.

"Yes, indeed it does. Yet now my dear mother has departed, I feel I was a traitor ever to have dreamed or thought of anything but looking after her."

Tears welled into his eyes, but the mellow calmness of the summer evening, the scent of the roses in his hand, the presence of his kind young friend, soothed his soul, ashamed though he was of the lurking consciousness of freedom and anticipation of the future that mingled with this sense of mental consolation.

"Do you know," he confessed as they trudged past the gates of the lunatic asylum, "that when I went past that place on my way back from my holiday I was almost inclined to envy the poor creatures inside it!"

"Good gracious!" said Miss Blake with a glance through the gates and a shudder. "You must have been feeling morbid!"

"I suppose I was!" he admitted; and then he told her of his aunts' offer and of his prevarication at the moment, of his terrible distress of mind during his journey home, that had seemed so reprehensible when he arrived and found his mother on her death-bed, despite the fact of his having recognized fully from the first how impossible it would be for him to leave her.

"It seems like a judgment!" he concluded with a heart-rending sigh; and he listened hungrily while Milly Blake administered comforting commendation for what in her opinion had been his heroic attitude.

"Very few men would have sacrificed such a chance," she added emphatically. "You meant to do what was right, and of course you could not help your feelings. I do not see why you should blame yourself at all."

"Really and truly?" he asked hopefully.

"Really and truly," she affirmed, looking up at him with an encouraging smile.

All this as they entered the cemetery and walked along the well-kept gravel path that led them to the new-made mound of clay topped with dead and dying flowers. Together they stood for a few moments alongside it, their heads bent in silent prayer; then with one accord they cleared away the dead débris, heaping it at the edge of the pathway with

reverent hands. The elaborate cross contributed by the Blakes was now a mass of dropping, brown, hot-house petals. The Blakes were well-to-do people, and their stuccoed, balconied villa was further embellished by a conservatory.

"I have never thanked you for this," said Harold in self-reproachful apology. "I do hope you don't think me wanting in appreciation. It was so kind of you all!"

"Oh! we didn't expect you to write. Of course not. You must have had so much to do and think of. It was a pleasure—I mean a sad pleasure—to make it for her. I chose all the flowers I felt sure she would have liked best."

"You made it yourself?" His voice trembled with gratified emotion. She nodded, and he stooped to pluck from the cross a bud that, by a miracle, had survived the surrounding decay. Tenderly, deliberately, he placed it in his pocket-book.

"In memory of her—and of you," he said softly.

The silence, the sorrowful atmosphere that lay about them, deepened their mutual understanding. Harold felt overwhelmingly drawn to his gentle, colourless, yet to him sweet, companion.

Milly Blake, for her part, thought young Mr. Williams looked like a saint-well, perhaps saint was too Romish a comparison rather, say, an angel! His hat lay on the grass; the glow of the sunset burnished his rippling hair till it resembled some nameless metal, reminding her of the pleasing, artistic little plaques that were let into the backs of their dining-room chairs at home-not altogether copper, not altogether steel, nor brass. Oh! what did it matter? Simply his hair shone, and his eyes, deep set, of a dark, disturbing blue, moved her slow senses to an unaccustomed warmth, made her feel she could even bring herself to put her arms about his neck, kiss him, entreat him to take her with him as his wife wherever he might go, were it to the ends of the earth. . . . Horrified at her own sensations, she controlled them valiantly, blushed, looked away, laid a restraining hand on her heart that fluttered so tumultuously.

"You won't forget me?" murmured Harold, a little chilled by her silence.

"No," she said below her breath. "I won't forget you."

There came a pause fraught with tremulous feeling on both sides. It was Harold who broke the silence.

"I wonder—" he began, and hesitated, moved nearer to her. She waited breathlessly.

"I wonder," he continued more boldly, "if you would let me write to you from time to time? It would be such a—such a pleasure if it wouldn't bother you too much to answer?"

"Oh, yes," she answered dully, "it would be a pleasure to me too."

Her voice was calm, the calmness of cold comfort; she could have wept with disappointment, so certain had she felt that he had been about to ask her a quite different and far more potent question! Yet her innate common sense came to her aid. After all, how could she expect him to make her a definite proposal at this stage of their friendship, while his future was still unpronounced, while the whole of his attention must be devoted to preparation for the noble career he had chosen! It was not for her to hinder him, distract him;

rather was it her sacred duty for the present to repress her inclination to reveal her feelings, to discourage any decided declaration of affection on his part. . . . They had agreed to correspond; that at least was a definite step on the road to a happy understanding in the future.

In the class to which the Blake family belonged, for a lady of marriageable age to exchange letters with a gentleman who was free from matrimonial ties argued an intimacy that should have but one ultimate outcome.

She felt that enough had occurred for the present; it would be foolish to precipitate matters. To begin with, her parents might object not only to the worldly position of the young man himself, but to a long engagement; and it would have to be a very long engagement, for even if she were able to leave her people, she could not expect to accompany Mr. Williams to India as his wife when he first went out. He would have to grow accustomed to the country and to his work, as well as provide a home. Meantime she could prepare herself for the duties and privileges of missionary life abroad, read all the literature she could

lay her hands on in connexion with such work, even perhaps contrive to learn the language, though how she was to find a teacher amid her native surroundings was a problem—perhaps someone belonging to the local mission headquarters?

These thoughts kept her silent as she watched Mr. Williams give final touches to the bunch of pink roses and balance the glass case at the head of the grave.

When, presently, as he turned with a sigh and a last look at his mother's resting-place, the sentimental feeling he had entertained for his companion had lost something of its ardour. His mind was occupied with the question as to what kind of memorial stone might be within his means to erect when the time came. It would have to be something very simple. He had a little money in the Post-Office Savings Bank, and the sale, already arranged for, of their few bits of furniture would add a trifle to it. . . . He supposed his aunts would defray all his expenses during his training.

Hardly was he conscious of Miss Blake's presence as they left the cemetery; certainly

her reflections as to the future were far from his own. Any concrete idea of an engagement or marriage had not presented itself to his mind when, as they parted, he accepted her blushing invitation to join the Blake family circle at supper that evening.

"Only just ourselves, of course, and my young cousin," she assured him, "and no difference made; just take us as we are."

"If you are sure I shall not be in the way?" he demurred conventionally, thankful to be spared the prospect of a lonely evening.

"We shall be only too pleased to see you!" exclaimed Miss Blake.

But she felt damped because he did not again press her hand or look into her eyes intently, though she consoled herself with the assurance that their minds were in harmony; it was necessary to control their impulses, matters must not be permitted to progress too rapidly. . . .

Despite his heart-sickness and sorrow, Harold Williams enjoyed himself, comparatively, at the Blakes' that evening. Conversation was suitably subdued; even Mr. Blake lowered, or attempted to lower, his naturally loud voice; while Mrs. Blake, clad in black silk as a tribute to the guest's recent bereavement, was hospitably and sympathetically solemn as she "assisted" poor young Mr. Williams to lobster salad with a lavish hand, carved him the best bit from a loin of cold roast pork, and insisted on his having a second large helping of "sweet." The Blakes were teetotallers, but they made up for it in the quality and the quantity of their fare, denying themselves nothing in that respect, though, Harold included, they all left a small portion on their plates from each course as a sop to "manners."

The only element that jarred on the company was the presence of the "young cousin," who was spending part of his holidays with his relations; he had but lately arrived at the stage of loud waistcoats and ties, and was rudely self-conscious. When Mrs. Blake remarked to Mr. Williams with her usual careful pronunciation, "So my daughter tells me you propose to become a missionary?" the youth sniggered and said, "Sooner you than me, any day!" which disconcerted Harold as he answered that that was his idea.

"A very noble determination," was Mrs. Blake's verdict.

"Well, I could never stomach blacks myself," said Mr. Blake; "but I s'pose we've got to look after 'em, being what we are, the first nation of the world."

"Poor things!" interposed Milly. "It is so sad to think of them."

"Ten little nigger boys," chanted the cousin jocosely.

Mr. Blake suppressed a chuckle; with reproachful severity Mrs. Blake and Milly bade their young relative be quiet, and with a muttered reference to the King of the Cannibal Islands he relapsed into a resentful silence, devoting himself to his food.

Mrs. Blake monopolized the guest after supper, while Mr. Blake and the cousin retired to the conservatory to smoke and Milly tinkled hymn tunes on the piano. She drew him into a corner, and talked below her breath of "the poor dear departed," also gave him motherly advice connected with the avoidance of intoxicating drinks, and the wearing of flannel next his skin. Incidentally, too, she betrayed an interest, not to call it curiosity, concerning his

financial prospects. . . . His aunts, she presumed, were in very comfortable circumstances, no doubt he was their heir?

Harold told her with truth that he had not thought about it; that all he relied upon was their support during his studentship and the start they were ready to give him as a missionary in the East. He expected nothing else; after that he would fend for himself.

"In such a calling," he added gravely, 
one does not consider worldly advantages, 
and I dare say I shall be very poor; but if only 
I can do good——'

"Quite so," agreed Mrs. Blake. "But how much more good you would accomplish with means at your disposal. I hope your aunts will remember that."

"If they leave all their money to missions it would answer the same purpose," suggested Harold. "Individual effort and sacrifice are so sorely needed out there, without thought of personal advantage. As long as the mission itself is supported there is no need for the workers to possess more than will keep body and soul together. At least, that is how I understand the position."

"Quite so," repeated Mrs. Blake absently.

She smoothed her black silk lap, gazed at her daughter, seated at the piano, and made no further remark; and Harold felt that for some unfathomable reason she had done with him, that it was time for him to take his leave.

"Well," he said, half rising, "I think I must be going."

He was taken at his word. Mrs. Blake rose altogether.

"Milly," she called, "Mr. Williams says he must be going. Tell Father."

Miss Blake shut down the piano and obediently summoned the smokers from the conservatory. There ensued a general leavetaking, shaking of hands, expressions of goodwill, and hopes of meeting again before long.

"Give the blacks what for!" advised Mr. Blake. "Tell them to wear clothes and say their prayers to the Almighty and let graven images alone."

The cousin winked at Harold behind his uncle's back. Mrs. Blake patted the departing guest's shoulder and breathed benedictions. Only Milly stood silent, a little apart,

and as her turn came for farewell she looked yearningly into the eyes of her "friend" without a word. Then, as he left the room, she followed him, on an impulse, into the hall.

"You will write?" she besought him hastily, holding out her hand. "I shall be so anxious to know how you get on."

"Yes, yes, of course," returned Harold. He wrung the trembling, small-boned little hand, smiled sadly, gratefully, and stepped out into the summer night.

With a choking sob Milly would have fled up the staircase to her bedroom, there to think at her will of Harold Williams and what the future might hold for them both, but that her mother was lying in wait for her, black and large and forbidding, at the sitting-room door.

"One minute," said Mrs. Blake firmly. "I want just a word with you, Milly."

Accustomed from her childhood to prompt obedience, the girl repressed her agitation, followed the portly figure, and shut the door. Mother and daughter were alone, Mr. Blake and the cousin having repaired again to the conservatory, and "the word" at once multiplied into many.

"What did you say to that young man, may I ask? I fancied I caught something about writing."

"He wanted to write to me," quavered Milly; "and," she added more boldly, "where would be the harm?"

"Young people have been known to write themselves into matrimonial engagements. It strikes me he has taken advantage of our kindness in making such a request."

"But I do like him!" declared Milly, astonished at her own temerity, "and I am sure he likes me."

"All the more reason, then, that you should not correspond. The chap has no prospects; he will be going out of the country; nothing could be more displeasing to us. Father and I would never consent to your throwing yourself away. Father has worked hard for his money, and he didn't make it to go into the pockets of missionaries, which is what it would come to." She paused. "And if you ask me," she went on vigorously, "I don't believe the young fellow 'likes you,' as you call it, in that way; he's all for his work. But if you two once begin writing

there's no knowing what he'll take into his head, or put into yours, if you haven't put it into your own already." She took a deep breath. "Don't be a silly girl, with Josiah Cotton only waiting for you to hold up your little finger. You couldn't ask for anything better. A partner in Stumps and Co., with no relations hanging on to him, and well in your own class of life. That Williams has bad blood in him, remember—his mother, a flipperty-gibbet off the stage, so they said, though I don't deny she had her good points. You made a mistake, going along with him to the cemetery and asking him here to-night, putting ideas into his head."

"But you've just said you didn't believe he had any liking for me in that way!" protested Milly in despair.

She felt that her mother had been contradicting herself all along the line, but she had not the wits or the spirit to argue successfully. She saw the one real romance of her life fading away. It would be hopeless to try and hold on to it in face of her mother's determined opposition. Confusedly she realized that her angel, her hero, must remain just a

cherished memory, connected with a dream that could never come true.

"Well, I don't believe it, and I say it again," maintained Mrs. Blake; "but I'm not going to have you running any risks. If he does write to you I'll answer the letter, not you!"

A crushed and broken Milly Blake wept herself to sleep that night. She compared herself to a bird with clipped wings, to a lamb led to the slaughter before the altar of matrimony as the wife of Josiah Cotton, with his thick lips and black whiskers and his stubby hands—such a contrast to Harold Williams! She knew she could never hold out against the combined forces of Josiah and her parents; and Harold would go across the seas, to forget her in all the engrossment of his calling and his work. He would never know how willing, how desirous she had been to wait for him, if need be for years and years!

## CHAPTER V

"SITA RAM! Sita Ram!"

The fakir sat cross-legged, Buddha-wise, on the river bank, repeating at intervals the only words that, under his holy vow of silence, he was permitted to utter—the names of the god and goddess famed in Hindu mythology to whom his vow was dedicated.

His hair was matted and piled into a coneshaped chignon from which long strands depended on to his shoulders; his body, nude, save for a salmon-coloured loin-cloth and a string of carved beads, was whitened with ashes; around him lay his worldly possessions, the begging-bowl into which passers-by threw their offerings, the brass vessel for food, the drinking-cup and the little pair of iron tongs for handling live charcoal. Seldom did he move day or night from the sacred river bank, devotee as he was of an old and cruel cult whose origin lay far back in the shades and mysteries of Nature worship.

The mid-day sun blazed over the wide waters of the Ganges, that at this season of the year were much reduced, and long spits of sand ran out to meet the bed of the stream. Not far from the spot where the fakir sat motionless, erect, the sand had accumulated till it formed a kind of natural dam rising half-way up the face of the cliff, the water washing up a deep creek worn away by the rains of centuries on the other side. At the end of this miniature promontory lay a party of crocodiles basking in the sun like so many logs of timber, just as large and as rough-looking, and apparently as lifeless. Some of them lay with wide-open jaws that recalled gigantic pairs of scissors, while venturesome birds perched on the tongues to pick insects from the foul cavities.

The only object that moved at the foot of the cliff behind the fakir was a slight figure garbed in black, over-weighted by a melon-shaped sun hat—a young Englishman, who plodded through the sand with strained persistence, as though urged by nervous energy. He was the latest joined recruit to the Christian mission that had its headquarters in the city, a mile or so beyond the grove of

mango trees crowning the sloping cliff. His build was slender, his features delicate, and the dark blue eyes that looked out from beneath the hideous hat were red-rimmed, weary.

All that long, hot morning Harold Williams had been following his chief through outlying villages, hearkening to exhortations, delivered in a language that he did not understand, to groups of apathetic people, mostly women and children, with a sprinkling of aged men and lazy youths who should have been at work in the fields. Only yesterday had he arrived at his destination in the East, and his mind was full of horror and pity for the poor pagan souls whose ignorance of "the message" was so appalling, so deplorable.

Now for the time being he was free. His chief, the Rev. Mr. Cartmell, was busied with correspondence, and the newly joined missionary had wandered down to the river, restless in spirit, puzzled and distressed in mind, obsessed more strongly than ever with the desire that had driven him from his own country to lighten the darkness of "the heathen," to show them the path to peace.

He felt rather despairing. How long would it be before he could talk to these unfortunate people in their own tongue, tell them of his sympathy, his yearning to help them, assist in imparting to them the truth? The difficulties to be overcome before he could feel himself of real use seemed colossal, endless, to his perplexed soul and tired body.

He stood for a moment to draw breath and look about him, and his eyes fell on the dark shapes that lay at the end of the rib of sand. He mistook them for the trunks of felled trees, and wondered how they came there, until suddenly one of them slid into the water. He gasped with the realization that they were living creatures, and he recalled all he had read in the past of crocodiles that infested the Indian rivers, that were said sometimes to penetrate inland and pursue human beings. Now actually he was gazing at crocodiles in the flesh, and they were comparatively near; great, evil, hungry brutes. He shivered and turned in the opposite direction, to notice with a sense of relief a human figure seated back towards him. Any possible danger must be remote if a man could sit

unconcerned in sight of these horrible creatures.

But another shock awaited him as he approached the solitary form, making a detour that he might face it. He was gazing at a creature that seemed to him hardly more human than the crocodiles. Was it a graven image, some frightful symbol of idolatry, planted there in the sand? Then he guessed that he was in the presence of a "devil worshipper," one of those ghastly, misguided devotees of a false faith that advocated complete withdrawal from the world, self immolation, bodily torture. Of such also he had read and heard, seen pictures, scarcely crediting their existence. He felt sickened yet fascinated by the grotesque, unbelievable vision. Only with the strongest effort did he control his astonished disgust.

"Good morning," he said politely. Surely brotherly love and goodwill could be conveyed by manner and intonation, if not yet through language?

In answer to his greeting the fakir's bloodshot eyes flickered; he held out his beggingbowl and called "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" Harold Williams hesitated, embarrassed. It would seem hardly conformable with his conscience to give alms to this servant of Satan, and, moreover, he had no money in his pocket. He stood there, speechless, disconcerted, fidgeting his feet in the sand.

The sun was overpowering; it would have been difficult to say whether the earth or the air were hotter. To Williams it was as if he stood within reach of some mighty furnace. And yet in India it was still spring-time. Sweat poured from his forehead, his clothes clung damp to his body, and he trembled with exhaustion. Behind him rolled the mighty river, dull and turgid; before him sat this travesty of a human being. He regretted his excursion, wanted to go back forthwith, but some strange attraction held him to the spot. For the moment time and space were nothing as he stared and stared at the idol-like figure, taking in every detail of the ash-smeared body and the cadaverous countenance with caste marks painted on the forehead. The burning eves seemed to be fixed upon something beyond, something that, as he glanced nervously back, he could not himself perceive. And all

at once, unaccountably, he remembered the time of his mother's death.

His mind crept on, puzzled to account for the recollection, until he felt it had something to do with the little white dog that had been her special pet. For two or three days after her death the dog had sat motionless in a corner of the room, refusing all food and persuasions, its eyes following somethingsomething no one else could see; and finally the dog had died, there in the corner where it crouched. A sound broke the spell, the sound of a regular, high-pitched chant, and adown the shelving bank of the river came a white-clad procession, bearing in its midst a light wooden bedstead on which lay a corpse. The bearers took short, running steps, and their burden rolled about helplessly. Stupefied, he watched the proceedings-how the corpse was dumped on the ground without reverence or care; and then he noticed a pile of wood at the edge of the water. Preparations continued briskly, with much chatter and commotion. He could not quite see what was happening, but presently there rose a slight plume of smoke that quickly increased in volume.

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" shouted the fakir.

One of the mourners approached to drop a copper coin into the begging-bowl, made obeisance, and returned to the busy crowd. A smell of scorching flesh went up to heaven, a greasy, nauseating smell, the chant around the funeral pyre rose and fell, the sun blazed over it all. No one paid heed to the slim, black form of the young man who had come from afar, so full of fervour, to tell them that they were all wrong, that light and peace and happiness awaited them if they would but listen and learn. If only he had been able to speak to them! What a chance! But he was tongue-tied, helpless, and with a passionate determination to work as no novice had ever worked before him at the language, Williams began to cross the waste of sand, to make his way painfully up the face of the cliff, haunted by the sickening odour of burning flesh and the hateful picture of the fakir, with his far-seeing eyes and ash-smeared limbs.

He hardly knew how he got back to the Mission House, and once arrived he sat silent, abstracted, while his chief's well-meaning spouse scolded him for missing his breakfast, also for keeping the meal waiting; but goodnaturedly she made him a fresh cup of tea that tasted like nectar to his parched palate.

"Where have you been all this time?" she inquired with annoyed concern; and when he admitted that he had strayed down to the river he heard her say crossly: "You must understand that you can't play tricks of this kind out here. You might have got sunstroke, going off like that with an empty stomach, not to speak of causing us inconvenience and anxiety. Now go and lie down and have a sleep. I'll call you when it's time for the Bible class."

Humbly, thankfully he obeyed her, threw himself on the narrow bedstead in his whitewashed little chamber, the walls of which were dotted with lizards and unfamiliar insects. From without came the cooing of doves and the harsh cawing of crows; goats bleated plaintively; there was a ceaseless murmur of voices in the compound. As he fell asleep to these mingled sounds they seemed to echo the words "Tricks. . . . Empty stomach. . . . Bible class." And then, in his dreams, he

was down by the river in all the hot sun and the sand, where the heathen were burning their dead, and the fakir sat watching something that only his terrible eyes could see, as he shouted "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

That evening, after the Bible class, Mr. Williams was dismayed to learn that he was to be taken to "a party." He ventured timorously to protest that he had not come to India with a view to mixing in society. Mrs. Cartmell brushed his objections aside. She said that the occasion was not one of gaiety in the usual sense of the word; it was a reception given as heads of the station by the Commissioner and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Beasley, in honour of the Diocesan Bishop, who was on his annual visit of inspection. The Bishop was staying with the Beasleys, who, unlike most Government officials, were sympathetic towards missions, and had bidden them all to meet the important guest.

"But," he argued, perturbed, "what ought I to wear?"

"Your black clothes and white tie, of course. India is just the same as England

where these customs are concerned. No one wears white drill nowadays."

Mrs. Cartmell spoke with cheerful authority. She looked forward to appearing in her one evening gown—black lace over white Jap silk; it was so seldom she had an opportunity of wearing it. That morning she had made time to excavate the garment from the depths of a tin-lined packing-case, and it was now reposing on her bed, smelling strongly of camphor and neem leaves, the best preservatives, in her opinion, against the onslaughts of moths and white ants.

Williams felt grateful to her for assuming that his reluctance was due to his ignorance of what was correct wear for gentlemen in India; he shrank from the confession that never in his life had he been to a "reception," his experience not having risen above "socials," penny readings, lantern teas and bazaars in his native country town, when the male company, perhaps, sported button-holes and fancy waistcoats and the ladies wore silk blouses.

He felt almost scandalized when Mrs. Cartmell (a missionary's wife!) appeared with elbow sleeves and her gown cut square at the

neck. And Miss Stopford, the lady worker attached to the mission, was dressed in pale blue, with a bunch of artificial flowers at her waist and a band of black velvet encircling her head. He thought Mrs. Cartmell looked much nicer than Miss Stopford, who had no hair to speak of, and whose figure, in defiance of all the laws of anatomy, seemed to protrude where it should have gone in.

He had no idea until then that missionary folk ever permitted themselves such frivolities. However, as Mrs. Cartmell had explained, this was no ordinary distraction, since it was to be sanctified by the presence of a Bishop. He wondered if the Bishop would deliver an address—if they would all sit in rows of chairs, refreshments to be handed round afterwards. He did not venture to ask for particulars as they set off in the antiquated vehicle that resembled a box on wheels, a perquisite of the mission, in which, he understood, Mr. Cartmell journeyed when conducting his itinerations to far points of the district. It occurred to Harold Williams that it was rather taking advantage of mission privileges to use this conveyance for secular purposes. Surely they could have walked to the reception, carrying their shoes in bags?

His heart beat nervously as they drove through a wide enclosure, all trees and smooth lawns and flower-beds (that much he could discern by the moonlight that was almost as bright as day), and halted beneath an imposing portico. A lot of carriages lined the broad drive, and motor-cars; evidently the whole station was assembled to meet the Bishop. Next, he was within a vast room, to receive an impression of palms and couches and carved screens, lit with pink-shaded lights, and crowded with people all talking and laughing: women bare-necked and bare-armed, men in correct evening garb. It was all like a picture in The Illustrated London News. That Mrs. Cartmell and Miss Stopford somehow looked different, out of place amid the smart gathering, gave him a feeling of relieved satisfaction.

The hostess, a handsome woman a-glitter with jewels, shook him by the hand; and then he was presented to the Bishop, a tall, stout personage with a grey beard and quick eyes, who looked him through and through as he uttered a few encouraging words.

"You have only just arrived in India, I understand? Good luck to you, my boy; stick to your work. It's well worth it."

And then Harold Williams was swallowed up in the crowd. He felt lost, forlorn; nowhere could he see the Cartmells or Miss Stopford, and he allowed himself to be shoved through a doorway into a corridor that was thickly carpeted and lined with flowers in pots. He stood there, humble and helpless, while from within the big room came the sound of singing.

The notes thrilled through the scented air, and the melody mounted to his brain with the perfume of the flowers, and the light-hearted gaiety of the couples and groups that passed him, all so regardless of anyone but themselves—a world of which he knew nothing, of which, he told himself defiantly, he wished to know nothing; he would almost rather be down by the river with the fakir and the crocodiles, and the cremators of the heathen dead, who at least lived in ignorance of their pitiable condition, than mingle in friendship with these so-called Christians, this heedless irresponsible throng. He edged along the corridor, caught sight of

an alcove that suggested refuge and solitude, dimly lit as it was by a lamp smothered in foliage, and he was about to plunge into the recess when he discovered that it was already occupied. A man and a woman sprang to their feet as though annoyed and surprised at the intrusion.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," he exclaimed, in flurried apology.

"All right, we were just going." The man, who was young, with bold features and a dark moustache, pushed quickly past him, and was followed more slowly by a girl dressed in white. At the same moment a tall, stooping figure, bearded, bespectacled, came pacing along the corridor in company with Mrs. Beasley, the hostess, who was saying:

"I am sure I saw her in the drawing-room not long ago. She was with Captain Radgement."

They were looking about them as though in search of some truant.

Williams became aware that the girl in white stood close to him, that she was speaking.

"It's very hot, isn't it?" she said, and her

voice, low and seductive, went fitly with the scents and the sound of the music and the soft, dim atmosphere.

"Yes, very hot," he responded mechanically as he looked into a pair of eyes that he felt, with reluctance, might have belonged to an angel.

Mrs. Beasley and the big, spectacled man halted before them. "Oh! there you are, Mrs. Taverner," she cried. "We have been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been?"

"Only standing here," was the girl's quick answer. "It's rather hot inside. We were thinking of going out for a breath of air, weren't we?"

She looked up with a smile at Harold Williams, who said "Yes," hypnotized into telling one of the few lies he had ever told in his life by her beauty and a sort of quiet persuasion in her manner. The situation bewildered him; he only felt that this exquisite creature was somehow appealing to him for assistance, that for some unknown reason she needed his help, and weakly he yielded to her spell.

"Yes, we were just going out for a mouthful of air," he stammered, feeling as if someone else, not himself, had made the false declaration.

"I thought you might like some supper, dear Mrs. Taverner, so your husband and I came to look for you." Mrs. Beasley fixed piercing eyes on Mr. Williams as though at a loss to account for Mrs. Taverner's choice of such a companion in her quest for fresh air.

"No, thank you, I don't want any supper," returned Mrs. Taverner briskly, and added to her husband: "I'll meet you later, in the drawing-room——"

She laid her little gloved hand on the missionary's arm, propelling him gently towards the veranda steps, and nodded a smiling farewell over her shoulder to the other couple.

They went out into the moonlit night. Mrs. Taverner made no apology, gave no explanation, as they wandered over the short, dry grass; she merely uttered conventional remarks concerning the brightness of the moonlight, the warmth of the air, the success

of the party. At last the silence of her escort drove her into asking questions.

"You are a stranger here?" she inquired sweetly. "I don't think I have seen you before to-night?"

"I only arrived yesterday—from England," he told her. "I have come to help Mr. Cartmell at the mission house."

"Oh! I see, and the Cartmells brought you with them to meet the Bishop."

"Yes, the Cartmells and Miss Stopford.
Do you know them?"

"I can't say I do, but, of course, I know who you mean—very good people. How does India strike you? Do you like India?"

He replied severely: "I have come out to work. It would make no difference whether I liked the country or not."

"Oh!" She paused, a little nonplussed by his statement that argued such a stern sense of duty. "And what is your work—preaching and teaching and converting, I suppose?" She glanced at what she dubbed in her mind his terribly "Low Church" clothes.

"I have to study the language first; one feels so stupid not understanding, not

being able to speak. I would have given anything this morning to say a few words of hope to a poor wretch I encountered down by the river. He was nearly naked, all smeared with white dust, an idolater I should imagine, from all I have heard and read of such sects, of the most benighted and bigoted type——"

"A fakir; I expect it was old Sita Ram, as we call him, because that is all he is allowed to say under his vow of silence. My husband declares he is a very well-educated man and understands English perfectly. Lots of them do! Arnold, my husband, is a great student of Indian religions."

"Yes, that was what he was calling out— 'Sita Ram! Sita Ram!' And you say he is an educated man? How dreadful to contemplate!"

"Well, after all, it's only like our own old saints who withdrew into the wilderness, hermits who lived in caves and led the simple life, men of learning too, who thought it worth while——"

"But they were Roman Catholics," he interrupted loftily, as if that would account for anything!

He wondered why his companion laughed: it was a pretty laugh that rang out like a soft silver bell, and he could not but forgive her levity, partly because the sound was so delightful and also because she was obviously a creature of the gay world who knew no better, whose heart had never been touched by the sorrows and sins of humanity, who was deaf to the groans of helpless souls oppressed by spiritual darkness. She was far from realizing that she herself was one of them, and therefore to be pitied. He felt he ought to say something that might open her eyes to the danger she walked in, the danger of losing her salvation; his heart beat fast as he called up his courage and at last said boldly:

"Madam, forgive me if I seem impertinent, but may I venture to ask—are you a believer?" And he held his breath awaiting her answer, which, when it came, chilled him.

"You are very kind, but we all have our own way of thinking on these subjects. Now I'm afraid I must go in. My husband will be waiting for me."

"Ah! I have vexed you," he cried, and he stood still, holding his hand out to her involuntarily. "But if you would listen, let me explain—"

It was torture to him to feel that this fair soul should dance lightly along the road to destruction unwitting of what lay before her.

"Remember Christ died to save you," he went on, his voice trembling. "It is a truth above everything else in the world. I beseech you, don't shut your eyes!"

His fervour, his eagerness, his simplicity obliterated his commonplace personality. Elaine Taverner looked at him with newly aroused attention as he stood there before her in the moonlight, his hand outstretched; she noted the delicate features, the large, deep-set eyes—the eyes of a born visionary—the wellshaped head and the fine, mouse-coloured hair that lay in ripples close to the scalp. She forgot the loose ill-cut clothes, the provincial accent, saw only his youth and his spirituality. And suddenly she felt strangely uncomfortable as she remembered the scene he had interrupted in the alcove! At any rate, his intrusion had been timely, for if that odious Mrs. Beasley had caught her and Dick Radgement together, she might have tried to put ideas

into Arnold's unsuspecting mind. Of late Mrs. Beasley had been watching them bothlike the cat that she was—not that there was anything that could be called definitely wrong in her friendship with Dick Radgement, yet this queer little man made her feel rather mean when, until now, she had been accustomed to regard herself in the light of a martyr. The feeling was unpleasant and it stirred her resentment; still, she could not bring herself to snub the unconscious cause. The creature filled her with too much respect, and he interested her, attracted her oddly as well. She was vain enough to scent a subtle compliment in his concern for her soul; it was a fresh sensation.

"You mustn't worry about me," she said gently. "You will have quite enough to do thinking about all the poor things you have come out to save. I expect I am past all hope!"

She smiled at him, gave his still outstretched hand a friendly little pat, and what with her beguilement and her beauty, so unlike anything in the experience of Harold Williams, the scent of the roses and the mango blossom, the magic of the Indian night, his heart heaved tumultuously; all his enthusiasm and aspirations seemed to concentrate in one overwhelming desire not to lose touch with this dainty being who had so suddenly crossed his path. Her next words were as in answer to his unspoken wish.

"You must come and see me," she said as they moved towards the house, "and we will talk about your work and all the queer things that happen in India. Perhaps you may find it rather a relief now and then to get away from the mission people—a little holiday?"

"When may I come?" he asked quickly.

She felt somewhat taken aback, having expected excuses, righteous hesitation; for her it would mean giving up an afternoon, and there was so much going on just now, what with the polo matches, and tennis, and all the rest of the station amusements.

"I'll let you know," she hedged; "tell me your name, and I'll write you a note."

"Williams, Harold Williams," he told her, and for the first time it occurred to him that his surname was extraordinarily common and unattractive. "All right, I'll remember. And mine is Mrs. Taverner, Elaine Taverner. My husband is the judge; he is a very learned person, and could tell you lots about natives and all their beliefs. You ought to read his books."

She sighed faintly, and Williams received a vague impression that somehow she was lonely, not altogether happy? How he would live for that little note telling him when he might come and talk to her—perhaps not only about his work and his hopes, but about herself as well. . . .

As they re-entered the big drawing-room, that by now was not so crowded, he caught sight of Mr. and Mrs. Cartmell and Miss Stopford standing expectant; they were waiting for him, and a sudden and shameful distaste for their appearance, and all they represented, assailed him—hymns and Bible classes, severe and unlovely surroundings, all that hitherto had seemed to him so right and so suitable, so self-sacrificing. . . . Miss Stopford looked positively ugly, Mrs. Cartmell so scraggy in the low-necked gown, and her husband struck him as lacking in dignity as he hovered humbly on the outskirts of

a leave-taking group that surrounded the Bishop! He could not think what had come over him; it was like some evil spell, and he tried to shake himself free of these unworthy impressions as Mrs. Cartmell pounced upon him, ignoring his companion.

"Here you are at last, Mr. Williams!" she exclaimed in unconcealed reproach. "We have been waiting for you, it's very late."

In the midst of his murmured apologies he saw the round-shouldered man who was Mrs. Taverner's learned husband come forward, and Mrs. Taverner joined him. She waved her hand kindly to Harold Williams as the pair left the room. . . . His glance followed her hungrily. Would she remember, would she keep her promise? At that moment he caught scraps of a conversation between two people behind him:

"Fancy old Taverner dragging himself away from his books to come to a show like this. . . ."

"I wonder how long that ménage will last. . . ."

There followed something that began:

"They say—" something about furlough and a schoolroom, and a poverty-stricken family. . . .

As in a dream Harold Williams accompanied the Cartmells and Miss Stopford to the mission vehicle awaiting them outside.

Almost until dawn he was haunted, half sleeping, half waking, with an unexpected conviction that somewhere in the past he had seen Mrs. Taverner, that her face was vaguely connected with some important episode in his life . . . over and over again the clue eluded his memory. It was somehow mixed up with the visit he had paid to his aunts more than two years ago, just before his mother's death, that landmark of time causing a change so stupendous as to blur details. Yet little recollections floated disconnectedly through his mind. . . . His aunts' comfortable old house (they were both dead now, poor old dears, leaving the bulk of their money to foreign missions with a sufficient legacy for himself to start him adequately on his career), brown eggs for breakfast, a harassed breakfast, by the way, disturbed by mental difficulties and doubts! Green-covered magazines containing illustrations—crocodiles,

## The Vow of Silence

fakirs, groups of native Christians, leading back to a stuffy, malodorous meeting-hall, and a row of figures on a platform——

At this juncture sleep intervened, blessed, deep sleep, too sound and too deep for dreams.

## CHAPTER VI

TEN days passed, ten days of such mental and physical effort for the young missionary as sent him exhausted each night to his bed, only, as it seemed to him, to sleep for a moment before dawn had broken and he was up and out again in the pitiless sunshine journeying with Mr. Cartmell to outlying villages, penetrating into the heart of the city where the smells and the sights turned him sick, rounding up "sheep" that showed symptoms of straying from the fold, standing for hours while the elder man preached and exhorted in the bazaars. Then the return to unappetizing meals that he could not digest even when hunger forced him to swallow them, quenching his constant thirst with lime-juice and water that lowered his vitality still further. Through the long midday hours he worked feverishly at the language and felt disheartened by his lack of progress. though his chief laughed at his lamentations

and told him repeatedly that Rome was not built in a day.

The Cartmells were adepts in the employment of quotations and ready-made phrases. "Slow and sure," they would exclaim encouragingly; "Time and tide run through the roughest day," "Remember the hare and the tortoise." And Harold, feeling a veritable tortoise in the tardiness of his advancement. extracted what comfort he could from these familiar reminders.

Mrs. Cartmell was kind in her way. She administered motherly scoldings when he left lentils and rice on his plate, and refused helpings of stew composed of goat's flesh and country vegetables. The scoldings were interspersed with homely references to "the inner man "; she gave him a bottle of fruit salt as a remedy for dyspepsia, though she suspected that in reality he was suffering from home-But she was too busy to enter further into his mental condition—he must take his chance, as they had all done in their young days before him.

When he came to her one morning and said nervously that he had received an invitation to "take tea" the following afternoon with Mrs. Taverner, the judge's wife, she was quite sympathetic, and urged him to accept on the grounds that all work and no play made Jack a dull boy; and she undertook to beg him off a meeting that was to be held for the mothers of the sewing-class. At the same time she was a little surprised and inquisitive concerning the invitation.

"How do you come to know Mrs. Taverner?" she inquired.

"I met her at that party, that reception for the Bishop," he explained, "and she was very friendly and kind. But if you think—"

"Oh! go by all means, my dear boy, it will do you good; the more we can draw the attention of outsiders to the needs of our calling the better. It would be a good opportunity to remind Mrs. Taverner about our girls' needlework. We could well do with more orders. They make collars and d'oyleys and tea-cloths, besides all kinds of embroidery suitable for garments that would be a little difficult perhaps for a gentleman to mention!" She smiled with playful delicacy. "But I'll

give you a price-list to show her, and if you just say embroidery...."

"I will do my best, of course," he agreed hastily.

He felt capable of "mentioning" anything provided he was free to take advantage of the invitation. Yet, as he wrote a stilted acceptance, he almost regretted that Mrs. Taverner should have kept her promise. Her note disturbed and excited him, for he had given up all hope of her remembrance, and now he feared that the visit might prove unsettling. At the same time, since she had not forgotten, it was beyond him to forgo the enjoyment of meeting her again.

Next afternoon he passed through the squalid patch of bazaar that encompassed the mission compound, went along the broad road that led to the civil lines, elated yet at the same time vexed because his boots and his coat became white with dust; he was also apprehensive lest Mrs. Taverner should not be alone—other guests might be present to disconcert him. Then as he came to large enclosures with smooth lawns and gay flower-beds, all so well kept and peaceful, he looked about him with

pleasure. Here were no screaming children or groups of ragged, diseased people, no mangy pariah dogs or nauseating smells. The houses stood white and dignified amid their orderly surroundings, the scent of freshly watered soil was an agreeable relief to his dust-filled nostrils.

At last he saw the name Taverner painted on a board beside a wide gateway, and he walked boldly up the drive. Two or three liveried servants sprang to attention as he approached the veranda steps. One of them held out a silver salver—what for? As the peon waited in haughty silence Williams stood perplexed, ignorant as he was of the Indian custom that entailed the presenting of visiting-cards before the hostess should extend polite permission to enter. He tried desperately to speak in Hindustani, but could only remember such useless words at the present juncture as "Come here," and "Go away," and "Who is there?"

Williams shook his head, and the man dis-

<sup>&</sup>quot;Memsahib," he stammered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Tikut hai?" ("Cards?") said the man imperturbably.

appeared into the house, while his fellow peons regarded the visitor with palpable contempt. To them he was just some "padre-wallah" of no account who doubtless had come to beg for a subscription. But their demeanour changed when presently their colleague returned with a civil salaam, indicating that the sahib was welcome. He was ushered into a large, cool drawing-room fragrant with flowers, bright with chintzes and cushions and handsome rugs; and Mrs. Taverner, looking more like an angel than ever, was shaking hands with him and saying how pleased she was to see him, and what a horribly hot walk he must have had, and how nice it was of him to come. . . .

Thank goodness she was alone. And he sank into a low chair, watching her graceful movements as she poured him out a cup of tea, handing it to him with an adorable smile. He drank the tea, after waiting, as he had been accustomed from childhood to do, until his hostess had tasted hers first. Then he felt soothed and refreshed, ready to enjoy every moment of her society; the time would pass only too quickly.

"Now tell me," she said, with interested sympathy, "how are you getting on?"

"Oh! fairly well, I suppose"—he paused, hardly knowing how to describe his condition—"but not quite so successfully as I had hoped and expected. I seem to be in such a muddle!"

"But that's inevitable," she assured him. "We all feel muddled when we first come to India. Everything is so different, isn't it? The hours and the food and the language and all the rest of it. I know I felt horrible when I came out. I thought I should never get used to it, and nobody seemed to care or understand. It's so lonely. I know exactly how you feel!"

Her tone was pathetic, and he observed, as she bent her gaze abstractedly on a little cake she had taken from the tea-table, how long and thick were her eyelashes; they cast quite a dark shadow on her pink cheeks! Never before in his life had he noticed a woman's eyelashes. Now he came to think of it, Milly Blake, that girl at home, the only girl he had ever regarded as a possible wife in the future, had thin, white eyelashes, and to think

that at one time he had considered her pretty! He marvelled how he could ever have felt attracted by Milly Blake!

Swiftly his memory travelled back to an English summer's evening, to the cemetery where his beloved mother rested . . . the scent of pink roses, an enamelled wreath in a glass case, a gentle, sympathetic companion helping him to remove a mass of dead flowers from the new-made mound of earth. . . .

Then of a sudden, with a sort of magiclantern change, his mind shot back to a village schoolroom, a row of people on a platform. Now he knew where he had seen Mrs. Taverner before!

At the moment he said nothing, for just then the long, dark lashes were raised and he found himself endeavouring to determine the exact colour of her eyes as she looked at him reflectively; were they blue, or green, or grey, or a combination of all three shades?

"But you—" he began. He wanted to remind her that her circumstances had been so different from his own, with a good husband and a fine house, friendly people about her. How could she have felt lonely or bewildered?

She read his thoughts. "You think I could have nothing to complain of?" she asked, challenge in her voice.

"Oh! I didn't mean exactly that," he prevaricated.

"Yes, you did," she laughed. "Fancy you, a missionary, telling such a story. I'm ashamed of you!"

"Oh, please!" He flushed all over his finely cut, sensitive face, and she took pity on his distress.

"Never mind; I understand. But, you see, I was very young, and my husband was so busy; his private hobby, the study of Eastern religions, took up all his spare time, as it does still. I don't make friends quickly. It's not my nature. I often think I must have been rather a trial to him at the beginning, poor dear!"

A vague recollection of the disconnected conversation he had overheard on the night of the Beasleys' party for the Bishop returned to him . . . "schoolroom—a poverty-stricken family," followed by the remembrance of his aunts' gossip at the supper-table after the lecture—an unhappy home, unsympathetic

relations all so much older than herself; had she been driven into an uncongenial marriage? or, perhaps, sacrificed herself for her family?

"You know I have seen you before—in England!" he announced, a little note of triumph in his voice.

"Oh! have you? Where?" she asked, interested and curious.

"On a platform in a village schoolroom at a mission lecture. It was between two and three years ago."

"Yes, I remember the evening," she said slowly. She had reason to remember it, for it was on that evening she had first met Arnold.

"My husband was there too," she told him.

"Was he? I only recollect noticing you
—I was so interested in the lecture—but my
aunts talked about you afterwards at supper."

"And who were your aunts?"

"Miss Rachel and Miss Martha Williams."

"Oh! really? Don't I remember them, dear old things, and how they hated my stepmother and she them! Fancy your being

their nephew. They are both dead now, aren't they?"

"Yes-unfortunately."

"What did they say about me?" she inquired with a mischievous smile.

He reddened, and she went on: "Never mind, I think I can guess. I know I was the talk of the village at one time, but then I really did have a most beastly time at home. I was thankful to get out of it!" She might just as well have said: "Any port in a storm!"

Her tentative confidence gave him courage; he began to feel the pastor again, that perhaps he might be able to help her with spiritual advice. He was now convinced that her married life had not brought her contentment or even resignation. If only he could lead her to look further for help and strength, awaken her soul that he feared lay dormant, atrophied.

"But why did you—how was it?" he began cautiously.

"You mean, how did I come to marry my husband? Perhaps it was more a question as to how he came to marry me! People marry

for all kinds of reasons, don't they? and I suppose nobody could deny that I had the best of the bargain. I'm not much of a companion to a man of his tastes. You see, he's so much older than I am, and so terrifically learned, and I am such a goose!" She laughed wistfully.

"Oh! don't talk like that!" he cried in distress.

He perceived the whole situation—an uncongenial, perhaps forced marriage on her side, a lonely unsatisfied existence despite outward appearances and creature comforts. It was pitiable! His feelings almost choked him as he strove to find words that might bring her consolation. . . .

"Nothing matters if you believe, if you pray-"

"But I always say my prayers, Mr. Williams." She gazed at him with innocent, serious eyes. "It's only that sometimes things seem rather hard. You mustn't think too badly of me."

A furious indignation seized him against the man who was her husband, evidently a hard, intellectual being, selfishly absorbed in his pagan studies, indifferent to the feelings of this sweet young creature committed to his charge, who was starving for sympathetic understanding.

"How I yearn, how I wish I could help you," he cried. "I can only urge—"

The sweet young creature held up a warning hand. Someone came into the room. It was Mr. Taverner.

"Oh, here you are, Arnold," said his wife pleasantly. "This is Mr. Williams, who has lately joined Mr. Cartmell's mission in the city, and, oddly enough, he knows my part of the world."

The judge cast an absent glance at the visitor from beneath his thick eyebrows, nodded, and sank into a chair as though physically and mentally weary.

"Had a hard day in court?" asked Mrs. Taverner, pouring his tea into a special cup that dwarfed the rest of the tea things.

"Yes," he replied laconically. Evidently his thoughts were far away.

"And now I suppose you'll go and grind at that old book of yours instead of resting."

Taverner did not answer. How boorish

of him, thought Harold; and he longed to make some trenchant remark that might rouse the man to a sense of his ill-mannerliness towards his wife. But he could think of nothing at the moment beyond Mrs. Cartmell's favourite quotation: "All work and no play," etc., which would seem too futile to utter. There was something, too, that awed him in his host's personality. He felt he was in the presence of a mental superior, which was exasperating as well as humiliating, and a sharp prick of hatred mounted from his breast and spurred his tongue.

"Mrs. Taverner has been telling me," he began loudly, "that you make a special study of Indian idolatries."

Ah, now he had attracted this bear's attention, struck the right note, for the heavy, bearded face turned towards him and a little gleam came into the short-sighted eyes.

"Idolatries!" echoed the judge, and took a deep draught of his tea, that appeared to refresh him, for he added almost briskly: "I should rather say religions; but no doubt we look upon these subjects from a different point of view." "There can be but one right point of view," declared the missionary with emphasis.

"By which, naturally, you mean your

own," said Mr. Taverner courteously.

"Not mine alone, most certainly. There is only one true religion, of which I am but a humble mouthpiece. All else is idolatry, devil worship."

"Yet does not revelation run through all ancient religions—I beg your pardon, idolatries? 'A good man,'" he quoted slowly, 'who thinks only of benefiting his enemy has no feeling of hostility towards him; the sandal tree at the moment of being cut down sheds perfume on the edge of the axe."

"That is not from the Bible," asserted

Mr. Williams.

"Quite so. It is from the Vedas. But doesn't the Bible corroborate the teaching?"

"Oh, Arnold, dear, do finish your tea," interrupted Mrs. Taverner, "and don't argue. Mr. Williams has his own work to do in his own way."

"I have no wish to argue," said her husband with amiable indifference.

He emptied his cup and rose ponderously,

held out his hand to the agitated visitor. "Now I must get back to my work. You would do well to study Sanscrit, Mr. Williams, if you wish to gain a trustworthy knowledge of the Hindu mind, not to speak of the teaching of Islam—a word that, by the way, means complete submission to the will of God."

He chuckled and left the room, his shoulders bent, dragging his feet over the Persian carpet.

As the portière fell behind him Williams gave a gasp of relief. The man frightened him. His knowledge was deep, so superior to his own. To the ardent little missionary Mr. Taverner seemed hardly human, and involuntarily he thought of the fakir down by the river. No wonder Mrs. Taverner was unhappy, tied to such an ogre who cared nothing so long as she did not interfere with his godless pursuits. Again fury overwhelmed him with this husband who took all and gave nothing, save advantages that money could buy; and what were they worth compared with neglect of his wife's soul!

He said excitedly: "I have no wish to study heathen teachings. I have come out

here to proclaim the true faith, to do the work that my Master commanded, not to burrow in the filth of the devil, or to admit that there can be any good in these unholy old writings that some day, please God, will be entirely forgotten, swept away."

"Oh, don't worry," advised Mrs. Taverner placidly. "Don't let him upset you."

"But it is dreadful," he went on, "to think that one of our own countrymen should for a moment countenance these false old faiths, find good where no good can exist. If only men of his capabilities would devote them in the right direction how much good they might do!" Mrs. Cartmell's words flashed through his mind: "The more we can interest outsiders in the needs of our calling the better."

Clearly Mr. Taverner was hopeless, but there remained Mr. Taverner's wife. What about "embroideries"? He could hardly go back and admit that he had said nothing to help the mission finances—that he had not so much as mentioned needlework. He added querulously: "You could do something to counteract in some degree your husband's lack of sympathy with our work."

"How do you mean—a subscription to the mission?"

"Not exactly that; but there is our class of Christian girls, who do wonderful needle-work—collars and d'oyleys and tea-cloths."

"Yes, I think I have heard. But I don't want collars or d'oyleys or tea-cloths. What about underclothing?"

He blushed. "I believe embroidery—"

Mrs. Taverner did not appear to observe his confusion.

"All that kind of thing is so expensive if you get it out from home," she continued. "Do you think if I gave you patterns of what I want done——?"

"Hadn't you better communicate direct with Mrs. Cartmell on the subject?" he suggested in alarm.

"Oh, I'd do up the parcel quite tight, so that you couldn't see what was inside it," and with a light laugh she rose and ran from the room.

Truth to tell, she was beginning to feel

rather bored with Mr. Williams's company, and it had occurred to her that the errand might move him to departure.

He sat awaiting her return, a victim to varied sensations. She was so angelic, yet so heedless. Could he ever hope to penetrate the thick cloud of worldliness that clogged her understanding?

She came back with a paper parcel that she laid on his knees with an engaging little gesture. His hands closed on it tenderly. It contained things she had worn, and, aghast at the feelings it evoked, he plunged into vapid conversation. Was she a tennis player? He used to play tennis himself at one time; but in England it was not a very convenient form of exercise—such trouble over lawns and balls, and, of course, the weather.

She said she played tennis almost every day; but to his disappointment she did not settle down again—walked about the room, rearranged a vase of flowers, put a cushion straight; now and then she glanced at the clock. He wondered if he ought to take his leave, but he suffered from the disability of his class to make a move at the right moment;

also he felt loth to quit her presence and the great cool drawing-room for the sun and the dust outside, and then the bare mission house and the Cartmells at the end of the walk back.

At last, urged by the disturbing fear that he might be outstaying his welcome, he said timidly:

"I am keeping you, perhaps?"

"There's no great hurry; I am only playing in a tennis match presently." But Mrs. Taverner did not sit down.

He stayed on, half reassured, half uncertain, and he felt both relieved and annoyed when another visitor walked, without warning or ceremony, into the room. He recognized the man who had been her companion in the alcove on the night of the party for the Bishop—a young man, now clad in flannels, well groomed, long of limb, with a resolute, handsome face and a dark moustache. Clearly he was an intimate friend of Mrs. Taverner's; they might have been brother and sister from their demeanour towards each other.

"Time's getting on," said Captain Radgement, after he had been introduced to Mr. Williams.

"Yes, I know. But they can't begin without us. Will you have some tea or a peg?"

Harold Williams opened his eyes. A peg! Surely the man was not going to drink spirits at this time of the day. What a shocking example of European vices before the native servants!

"Thanks, I should be glad of a drink," admitted Captain Radgement. "We've had a long day out on field practice. I only got back half an hour ago, just in time for a bath and a change. You told me to call for you at five, and I know I'm late, but I couldn't help it."

In answer to Mrs. Taverner's summons a servant appeared, who was bidden to bring whisky and soda-water and ice. This was the limit! When the tray was brought in Williams rose and made his farewells. He could hardly bring himself to shake hands with this dissipated young soldier. And he was Mrs. Taverner's friend! Clutching the parcel, he departed awkwardly, hating to leave her in such undesirable company.

She was kind and delightful to the end.

"You must come again," she said. "Come and tell me what Mrs. Cartmell thinks can be done about my things. Bring back the parcel yourself."

"Thank you," he stammered, "thank you. And you won't forget—" He could not finish the sentence, for he did not know exactly what he wanted her not to forget.

She lifted the curtain, smiling. "No, I won't forget. Did I forget to ask you to come and see me? Good-bye, and good luck!"

She dropped the curtain, and he passed through the vestibule and the broad veranda, between the salaaming peons, out into evening sunshine and the moist scent of flowering shrubs, a little human being torn with conflicting emotions, the import of which he did not yet realize. Was it his fancy, or did he catch a faint echo of laughter from within the bungalow as he moved dejectedly away? Was it possible that Mrs. Taverner and Captain Radgement were laughing at him?

## CHAPTER VII

HAROLD WILLIAMS had made no mistake in thinking that laughter followed his exit; but the merriment had nothing to do with him. It was just the laughter of two young people happy in each other's company, who, the instant the missionary disappeared, forgot all about him and fell to romping like the boy and the girl that they were at heart.

Elaine flung a cushion at Dick's head because he called her a lazy little wretch not to be ready when he had sweated and hurried to fetch her at the time appointed, and a pillow fight ensued. Dick's long drink was upset. He caught her by the wrists, and they swayed, laughing and shouting, till the very tea-table was in danger, and Elaine had lost a shoe. Then they paused, breathless, looking at each other in playful provocation, and as they paused the young man's handsome face clouded and his hands fell to his sides.

"Oh, Elaine," he said hopelessly, "what fools we are!"

"Why? The bearer will clear up the mess on the carpet. Where is the harm?"

The harm! The harm lay in the fact that they had drifted heedlessly from friendship and mutual attraction into love, and now were living in a false dream of delight that sooner or later must end in a tragic awakening. The man knew it. Of late his nights had been torture, disturbed with fears for the future. Away from Elaine he perceived the peril of it all; when with her, wisdom took wings and he yielded to the careless, happy present, though at times, such as now, the realization of their folly overtook him, just as the realization of inevitable death will seize upon the human mind at irrelevant moments—at a dance, perhaps in a bath, or when engaged in some trivial occupation.

"I don't mean the rotting," he said reluctantly. "It's everything else. We can't go on like this, seeing each other every day, knowing what we feel—it isn't cricket."

"Oh! Dick, don't be tiresome!" she cried aghast. "You can't imagine what it is to me to know I shall see you every day! It

makes all the difference. Arnold doesn't notice. We don't do anything really wrong. Why shouldn't we go on as we are?"

"Well, I can't stand it much longer if you can. You must give me credit for some sense of honour. The very fact that he doesn't notice makes it all the worse."

"You think only of yourself," she flared petulantly; "I suppose all men are the same."

"On the contrary, I think of you first, because I love you," he told her with tender patience. "What would happen if anyone gave him a hint? Mrs. Beasley, for example; I'm sure she smells a rat. Or if—or if he found out for himself." He moved about miserably.

"I shouldn't mind, and neither would you if you really cared, as I do. I believe you are tired of me!"

She flung herself, sulking, on the sofa, as he paced to and fro in his distress. He loved Elaine not only as a woman, but as one loves a child knowing all its faults and its natural tendencies, and he was well aware that she had no inkling of the hold he kept on himself, no notion of the restraint he imposed on his passions, but for which repression the situation

might have become far more serious even by now. He knew beyond all doubt that her heart was his, that she loved him truly; and had his moral standards been lower-well, she would have been at his mercy, for she was without self-discipline, lived like a butterfly, regardless of the future. His naturally clean young mind revolted against intrigue and deception; it was a terrible responsibility, and the weight of it, added to temptation, was sometimes almost more than he could endure, save when her beauty and her high spirits, and the delight of her presence drove away dread and brought forgetfulness. . . . He looked at her now, fractious, unreasonable, yet withal so charming, so girlish, so unwitting of his scruples. Could be ever make her understand?

"Elaine!" he exclaimed beseechingly.

"Dick!" she retorted, mock tragedy in her voice. Then of a sudden she burst into pitiful sobs, and in an instant he was kneeling on the priceless Persian carpet, his arms about her.

All question of right or wrong fled into the background as they "made it up," fondly, foolishly, with kisses and endearments which, had they been lawful lovers, would have held no element of shame.

"Then you aren't sick of me?" she murmured, nestling to him.

"Sick of you!" Further words failed him.

"Then why were you so horrid just now—why do you try to make me miserable?"

"Sweetheart! it's only that sometimes I'm so nervous, for your sake, of what might happen. If only I weren't dependent on the Army! But if we made up our minds to bolt and have done with it, we shouldn't have a farthing between us, though I need hardly tell you I'd work like a nigger in any way that I could for you. But I can't bear to think of your not having everything you wanted "—he glanced round the luxurious room—" and people being beastly to you, and all my fault!"

Elaine looked serious. "Oh, no," she said reflectively, "it would never do to bolt. We should neither of us enjoy starving and going about in rags, and you'd hate giving up the regiment. But I really don't see why we should worry about Mrs. Beasley or anyone

else—Arnold wouldn't pay any attention whatever was said to him."

Radgement did not feel so sure, and he said so. "After all, no decent fellow—and he is a decent fellow, you know he is, Elaine—would tolerate scandal about his wife!"

"Then let's wait and take our chance. It's so silly to meet trouble halfway——"

And she wheedled and coaxed till she had him submissive, while she herself grew lively, lighthearted again, and presently they started, very late, for their tennis engagement, chattering, teasing each other in the warm evening air that was laden with dust and the hot scent of mango blossom. . . .

From his wide-open study doors Taverner saw them. The sound of wheels and the general disturbance of their departure roused him from his absorption. He sat, pen in hand, his mind a-wander in the lore of ancient creeds and philosophies, the concentrated wisdom of ages.

Absently he watched his young wife seat herself in a dog-cart beside a youth whose name he did not attempt to recall, and he felt a vague satisfaction that she should enjoy herself, also that now he would have the house to himself for a spell before she should return to remind him of his domestic obligations—the dressing for dinner, the conversation (if so it could be called) during the meal, chitter-chatter concerning people and games that meant nothing to him, yet to which he would endeavour to respond with innate courtesy, tearing his thoughts from his manuscripts.

The sight of his wife in her white dress, her pretty face animated as she looked up at the handsome boy seated beside her, merely touched the surface of his attention; but it was sufficient to ruffle the surface, like some fragment cast on the bosom of deep waters. With a sense of painful interruption he shuffled his papers and read:

"As the sun, the eyes of the whole world, is not sullied by the defects of the (human) eye or of internal objects, so the inner soul of all beings is not sullied by the misery of the world—"

A long pause; his brain felt blocked, rebellious; perhaps he had tried it too high, switching it off from a long day of cases in

court combined with the usual heavy routine of office work. He had been up since dawn after a wakeful night... His vision became blurred; he wiped his spectacles.

"Living in such a world, I seem to be A frog abiding in a dried-up well."

A frog! A frog thirsting after the waters of knowledge of which he could never drink enough, the while all this ancient wisdom made no difference to the living, throbbing world above the well, where people lived and died regardless of the great truths expounded in the doctrines . . . that yet, if put into practice, must paralyze action.

He threw down his pen. Perhaps little Elaine was right; perhaps he needed rest, as the old writings had it, for: "The decaying body made of bones, skin, tendons, membranes, brains, muscle, blood, saliva, full of putrescence and impurity—"

With a weary sigh he rose from his littered table, and taking his hat, wandered dreamily out into the compound. One of the servants pursued him with a complaint, something to do

with the roof of the kitchen. He waved the man off and went on over the lawn till he reached the line of trees that marked the boundary, passed through a gap in the low mud wall, on and on, his head bent, his hands clasped behind him.

Now he traversed an outlying scrap of bazaar amid the clamour of dogs and children and interested spectators.

"It is the Judge-sahib," a shrill voice proclaimed. "Doubtless, like all the Feringhees, he is mad!"

Then an English carriage swept by, smothering him with dust. It contained a couple of ladies who bowed to him, with smiling indulgence, their salutations, which he returned belatedly, conveying the same impression—they considered him "mad," mad to be walking aimlessly in the dust and the close evening heat. He thought how little they understood that to him "the decaying body" mattered nothing; all that to them seemed so important was in reality perishable, changeable, of little account. . . .

As far as he was concerned at the moment, time and space did not exist, and it

was no surprise to him at last to find himself among the trees on the plateau overlooking the river. Absently he threaded his way through the trees and the ruined tombs of an old Mohammedan burying ground, till he stood at the edge of the cliff to gaze across the broad waters of the Ganges—"Mother Gunga," who for such countless ages had brought religious consolation to her worshippers, purifying the soul, healing disease, giving life to the earth and viaticum to the dying.

Down on the shore he discerned the figure of old "Sita Ram," seated motionless, erect—one of those beings who had found it worth while to withdraw himself from the world, who believed that the favour of the Lord of Heaven could be won by means of penance and prayer. Taverner envied the solitary form, envied the courage and the faith that could attain to such sacrifice. . . .

The sun was now setting, casting a red glow over the river and the flat, indistinct landscape beyond. The glory and the peace of it all soothed his mind. He recalled the old words:

"The sun never rises. When people think to themselves the sun is setting, he only changes about after reaching the end of the day and creates night below and day to what is on the other side."

Taverner was late for dinner that evening. Apologetically he joined his wife, who awaited him impatiently, a delicate vision in a pale blue tea-gown.

"What is the use," she said, "of my insisting on punctuality in the household when you are the chief offender? I hurried home to change and be in good time, only to find that you were out. Where have you been?"

"Where have I been?" he echoed abstractedly. "I believe I went down by the river."

"You believe you went down by the river! Surely you must know where you went. Do come along. I'm simply famished, and the khansamah is furious; he says the chicken cream will be ruined."

As they sat at the round table, that was like a dot in the centre of the big dining-room, Taverner endeavoured to adjust his

attention to his surroundings. He asked his wife what she had been doing that afternoon? Playing tennis, she told him, in the public gardens; a match that had been arranged—herself and Captain Radgement against Major and Mrs. Wiseman, and her side had won.

"How many wickets?" he inquired.

Elaine flushed with annoyance, laid down her knife and fork.

"I've been playing tennis!" she said loudly, as though he were deaf, "not cricket. Oh, dear, this is dreadful!"

She checked her temper on account of the servants, who, she felt, were listening with enjoyment beneath their outward impassivity, and forced herself to go on with the meal as her husband said civilly, but, as it seemed to her, with a contemptuous little smile:

"Of course, tennis! How stupid of me. I was mixing up the two games. You did play cricket, though, one day lately? A ladies' match, wasn't it?"

She made no attempt to answer him, and Taverner fell back into abstruse reflections, ignorant of the rage that grew in his wife's breast, till by the time dinner was over she was almost beside herself. The scene that afternoon with Dick in the drawing-room had disturbed her more than she had realized at the time, though it had ended "all right." Dick's occasional qualms of conscience frightened her, the very hint of a possible separation from Dick was too painful to contemplate; she could not give him up; life without his companionship, his devotion, would be impossible.

She told herself, as she flounced into the drawing-room, that she owed Arnold nothing, nothing! He did not care where she went, what she did, so long as he was not bothered with her. In addition, this evening, another small episode had disturbed her. When tennis was over, Mrs. Beasley had offered to drive her home from the club, an offer that was obviously intended to prevent her from driving off with Dick Radgement. Usually at that hour she and Dick went for a spin, "to get cool," in any direction that would ensure privacy, and so far no remarks on this custom had actually reached her ears. To-night, however, Mrs. Beasley had drawn her aside to say in a tone that was gravely persuasive:

"My dear, don't think me interfering, but, frankly, you know, you go about too much with Captain Radgement. Of course, neither of you means any harm, but it doesn't look well. I'm sure your husband--"

And Elaine had interrupted unwisely: "As long as my husband makes no objection, I don't see what business it is of yours or of anvone else's!"

She knew she had been unwise, not that it mattered or that she cared, but instinct had urged her to withhold the incident from Dick, who, she felt, might have agreed with Mrs. Beasley! Oh, if only Dick were her husband, she would never want to see or speak to any other man as long as she lived! But Arnold was her husband, Arnold who had gone straight from the dinner-table to his study that he might bury himself again in his books and his manuscripts, forgetful of her very existence. . . .

An impulse attacked her to follow him, torment him, disturb him. In her present condition of mind she could not face a long evening alone, with no company save her own unwelcome reflections.

She hesitated, looked at the piano; music only made her think of Dick, made her want to cry. Her fancy work lay on a table by the sofa—fancy work, what bathos! and as for novels and magazines, she could not bear to read of fictitious love affairs that ended happily.

The need for some revengeful outlet to her feelings drove her in the direction of Arnold's study. With intentional violence she switched aside the curtain that hung before his door, and saw her husband seated at his table surrounded with books and papers. Books were piled on the chairs, on the floor, on the stands that flanked the table. The light fell on his head, and she noticed the whitening of his hair; to her he was an old man. In a few years he must retire from Indian service, and she would have to go with him, have to live in some poky village in England, out of the world, while he wrote and read, immersed in his stale old pursuits, and she would be away, far away, from Dick. . . .

"Arnold!" she cried sharply.

He raised his head, blinking at her through

his spectacles. Even now he hardly realized her presence.

- "Arnold, look here, you must listen to
- "Well, my dear, what is it?" he asked resignedly.
- "What is it!" she echoed; and vindictively she pushed some books from a chair, though she did not sit down.
  - "Do I exist or don't I?" she demanded. He sighed, laid down his pen.
  - "The answer would seem obvious."
- "Well, then, I've come to tell you-" she paused abruptly.

What had she come to tell him? That he neglected and ignored her, and that in consequence she had fallen in love with Dick Radgement? The madness of such a course struck her dumb as she stood facing him in her blue tea-gown, angry, distraught, almost hating him.

"Won't it wait?" he asked dubiously. "Is it anything very important?"

The complaint about the kitchen roof recurred to his mind. "About the kitchen roof?" he added.

When she laughed he felt relieved, not discerning the bitterness in her laughter.

"Oh, nothing so important as that!" she assured him. Again she paused, and as she met his anxious, inquiring gaze her resentment melted. He was so unsuspecting and, in his way, so kind!

"What would you do if I were to go away—leave you?" She asked him the question with an air of detachment, regarding him thoughtfully.

"Why? Do you want to go to the hills? Certainly it is getting very hot. Forgive me, I hadn't remembered. Of course, you must consider your health, my dear child." He held out his hand. "How stupid and reprehensible of me!"

That was what he had said in connection with his mistake about tennis and cricket: "How stupid of me!" It was all one to him whatever she did.

"No; I don't want to go to the hills."

Of course she did not want to leave the station, since it would be difficult, she knew, for Dick to get leave this year; the regiment was so short-handed.

"Then where do you want to go?" he inquired in mild exasperation.

"Oh, I don't know. I meant something quite different. Never mind, it doesn't matter—nothing matters!"

Now he was really concerned. "My dear, what is wrong? What have I done or left undone?"

"Nothing, nothing!" she wailed.

He patted her shoulder, perplexed, perturbed, yet with one eye on his papers. If only she would explain what it was she wanted, and then leave him in peace to continue a piece of work that would occupy him far into the night. He grudged her nothing, all his worldly possessions were hers; he only craved quiet and time in return. . . .

The interlude in his life that had led him to make her his wife while on furlough in England was as a brief dream; he had done what seemed to him kindest and best at the time when he took her from a home where she was not wanted, where she had appeared so forlorn and unhappy, bullied by a harsh step-mother and disagreeable sisters, poor little girl, with her pink cheeks and big eyes!

He remembered, even now, how she had enjoyed their short honeymoon at a seaside hotel, bathing and paddling and laughing, doing just as she liked, while he waited for her. book in hand, seated on the beach; and how she had revelled in the London shops before they sailed for India, having carte blanche to spend what she pleased; and, in the couple of years that followed, she had seemed to like Indian life, to take as a duck to water to all the harmless gaieties and amusements he had never grudged her in view of her youth and high spirits. That mischief might come of her attractions had not occurred to him, did not occur to him now as the cause of her unexplained grievance.

"Do you feel ill?" he asked anxiously. "Shall I take your temperature?"

He quailed at the prospect that Elaine might be ill, shrank from all the upheaval illness must entail, and he cast about in his mind for some sensible woman who might come to the rescue—Mrs. Beasley? Mrs. Wiseman? They were friends of Elaine's, and no doubt would respond readily to any appeal for assistance.

## The Vow of Silence

He was thankful when Elaine declared she was perfectly well. It was probably some trifling ailment that would right itself. . . . He must be patient, try to please her. He made a mental note that he would write to a firm of jewellers in Calcutta and order a pretty pearl and turquoise necklace to be sent up at once; he remembered she had admired the kind of necklace in an advertisement only a few days ago.

"You are tired after your cricket. You take it out of yourself too much with all this exercise. Perhaps you want a tonic. Don't cry, little one; don't cry!"

"I can't help it," she sobbed. "You don't understand!"

"Yes, I do; I assure you I do. Go to bed, there's a good little soul, and rest. You'll feel better in the morning. I'll sleep in my dressing-room so as not to disturb you; I shan't be coming to bed just yet. There's a good deal of work I want to finish."

"Oh! finish it by all means!" she exclaimed angrily; and she went from the room, as she had come in, furious.

For a full three minutes Taverner sat thinking of her, wondering what all the commotion was about, what her grievance could possibly be.

Then as he turned again to his work he forgot her.

"I am the ancient sage, without beginning,
I am the Ruler and the All Sustainer,
I am incomprehensible in form,
More subtle and minute than subtlest atoms,
I am the cause of the whole Universe.
Through me it is created and dissolved,
On me all things within it hang suspended,
Like pearls upon a string—"

Elaine lay on her bed, weeping, and kissing Dick's photograph.

## CHAPTER VIII

It was late in the evening before Harold Williams was able to deliver Mrs. Taverner's package to Mrs. Cartmell. She was out when he got back to the mission house, having gone with her husband after the meeting to investigate some case in the bazaar to do with the persecution by his family of some youth who had shown leanings towards conversion; therefore supper was delayed. Miss Stopford told him about it, glancing up at him through her pince-nez from bundles of tracts that she was sorting on the dining-table. Poor Miss Stopford! how thin and plain she looked; her hands were all bones and loose, wrinkled skin. Williams wondered if, in the days of her youth, she could ever have been the least bit pretty.

"What have you got there?" she asked, observing the parcel.

"Only something Mrs. Taverner wished me to hand over to Mrs. Cartmell," he replied evasively.

Of course he could have given the parcel to Miss Stopford, explaining about it; but he felt he could not bear to part with it before he was obliged.

He hung about, making useless suggestions connected with the tracts, till Miss Stopford snapped at him. "You are only hindering me," she said crossly. ""Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"What time do you think they will be back?" he inquired, looking at the clock.

"Not for another hour, I should say. Are you hungry? Why do you not take a biscuit? there are plenty in the cupboard. In any case, please do not fidget. You distract my attention."

He murmured apologies, sat down, and took up a book, still keeping Mrs. Taverner's parcel on his knee; he liked to feel that it was so close to him—the parcel her little pink hands had packed with such care that he should not see what was inside it! Dainty hands, so unlike Miss Stopford's . . . and as he read he stroked the paper softly.

The book he had opened at random was one dealing with native customs and superstitions, omens, portents, and so forth, for Mr. Cartmell prided himself on his knowledge of such matters; he contended that it impressed the people if they discovered the padre-sahib to be conversant with their primitive beliefs; rendered it easier, or, rather, perhaps a little less difficult, to combat idolatry.

The first paragraph that caught Harold's eye ran as follows:

"When about to start on a journey it is unlucky to hear the chirp of a squirrel or the cry of a kite. If you stumble on leaving the steps of a house for a particular business it is unlucky, so put it off."

What unutterable nonsense! Yet he suddenly recalled the fact that he had stumbled that afternoon on the veranda steps as he was leaving the mission house to visit Mrs. Taverner, and involuntarily he was affected by a little chill of foreboding. Annoyed with himself, he turned the pages impatiently.

Now this sort of thing was ridiculous, of course, but interesting, moreover free from personal application: "Snakes guard hidden treasure. They keep a gem in their mouths, and if an intruder comes they spew the gem on

to the treasure, and if he touches it they bite him. Such a snake, as a rule, is the ghost of the original owner of the treasure."

Again he turned the pages and came upon descriptions of customs connected with birth and death, marriage, and the procuring of male offspring, that disgusted and revolted him; passed on to information concerning demons and witches, ghosts and godlings, amulets and protective charms, interspersed with proverbs and sayings, some of them so worldly-wise that he could not but smile over the knowledge they revealed of human nature.

"Near relations are fault-finders."

"If calves could draw the plough who would buy the oxen!"

"He cannot dance and blames the ground."

"The uncle has the earrings, and the nephew boasts about them." And so on.

But the remedies for disease!

"Pea-fowls' legs are much sought after as an antidote against fevers and earache."

"Soup extracted from the spotless white paddy bird is a specific for asthma in any stage." Appalling prescriptions were given for the cure of various complaints, compounds of the blood and brains and entrails of reptiles and animals. And love philtres! For example:

"Kill an owl on Monday. Take out its eyes and burn them. Take the ashes of the right eye and throw it on the woman's garments and she will love you. When you wish to be rid of her, throw on her the ashes of the left eye and she will leave you."

Pah! what abominations! He shut up the book violently, and Mrs. Taverner's parcel rolled from his knees to the floor. At the same moment Miss Stopford rose, gathering bundles of tracts together.

"There!" she exclaimed, "that is accomplished, thank goodness. Now for some paper and string. This would do splendidly."

Before he could prevent her she pounced on the sacred parcel and began to untie the string.

"No, no!" cried Harold angrily, wresting the parcel from her. She stared at him, astonished, indignant.

"Good gracious, Mr. Williams, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing—nothing is the matter with me. But this—these things have been entrusted to my care. You have no right—I cannot permit——"

His voice failed him, and leaving the string in her hands, he escaped to his bedroom, clutching the now loosened and untidy parcel to his breast.

His lamp had not been lit, but there was enough light for him to see what he was doing, as he seated himself, breathless and trembling, on his bed, laid the parcel on the coverlet. The paper gaped, and in his endeavours to straighten it his hands came in contact with delicate, cobwebby garments that felt like rose leaves to his touch. Losing all command of his senses, he knelt down by the bed and buried his face in their folds, enraptured, drugged, wafted into ecstasy. How fragrant, how delicious! It was as if he held the owner of these intimate possessions in his arms; his whole being ached with delight.

The sound of voices outside recalled him to a sense of his guilt. Mr. and Mrs. Cartmell had returned. The reaction was painful; he felt just as he had felt in his boyhood when on the verge of detection after stealing apples or sugar. His conscience clamoured, his brain whirled, as helplessly, distractedly, he remade the parcel and searched unsuccessfully for some string.

Then cunning came to his aid. He folded the ends of the paper neatly, pressing them down, and joined the Cartmells and Miss Stopford at the supper table, outwardly composed, sitting down to sardines and sour bread spread with buffaloes'-milk butter, and glasses of lemonade, ignoring Miss Stopford's penetrating glances as he produced the parcel and murmured Mrs. Taverner's message. It was torture to him to watch Mrs. Cartmell unfold the paper with her desecrating touch.

"Humph!" she remarked disparagingly, peeping inside. "What extravagant rubbish! How any woman can—— However, it means work for our girls. 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

This was the climax; it was more than Harold Williams could brook.

"We are not all alike," he almost shouted, his pulses throbbing; "and I think you should remember that Mrs. Taverner belongs to a different world from our own."

"Ah!" ejaculated Miss Stopford, with triumphant insinuation.

Mrs. Cartmell gazed with cold surprise at her husband's assistant.

"I do remember it," she said acidly; "and I should say that the less you associate with that world the better!"

She rose and placed the parcel on a side table with a virtuous air, and the culprit refrained from retort. In his heart he knew she was right; and directly the uncomfortable meal was over he fled to his room, there to fall on his knees and pray for pardon and guidance, to pray passionately for preservation from haunting visions and sinful thoughts.

## CHAPTER IX

ELAINE'S light-heartedness left her, or if it returned in any degree it was only to take flight again. Disquietude fell upon her from the night when she had intruded into Arnold's study so full of rancour and resentment. If possible, her love for Dick Radgement deepened, increased, together with this feeling of insecurity that rendered her restless and depressed.

In addition the heat tried her, for, though healthy enough, she had never been robust, and loss of appetite, loss of sleep, told on her nerves. She lived for the meetings with Dick, yet when they took place she would quarrel with him, accuse him of slights, refuse to listen to explanations, repulse his caresses. And Dick, in his turn, grew more wretched as each scene, though followed by reconciliations, seemed to make matters more difficult and perplexing. It was an unnatural condition of affairs for them both that could hardly con-

tinue, as Radgement clearly perceived; while Elaine was conscious only of the effect on herself and not of the cause.

The station was emptying fast; now there were few evening diversions, and she tired of tennis. The days seemed endless; she could settle to none of her accustomed occupations, and she craved for some fresh excitement that might lessen the tedium and distract her thoughts.

It was this mood that drove her to take a spurious interest in the aims of the mission. Mrs. Cartmell had written her several notes concerning her patterns, finally suggesting that she should come and see for herself how her orders were progressing. Half amused at her own decision, she made an appointment, and drove down one evening to the mission house in her smart little carriage drawn by a pair of spirited cobs. Mrs. Cartmell received her with flattering ceremony; she felt quite a personage as she was introduced to the class of Christian girls clad in clean white clothes, who smelt of camphor and coco-nut oil, and gazed at her with round eyes that reminded her of rabbits. They sang a hymn in piercing nasal voices, and displayed their needlework with anxious pride.

"You see," said Mrs. Cartmell, as she dismissed the class, and the girls fluttered giggling and whispering from the room, "what an immense thing it is for them to feel that they are useful, and that anyone like yourself should be interested in their efforts. These girls will, I hope, grow up with a sense of duty and influence their husbands when they marry. It is all a foundation for the ultimate conversion of India. Mr. Cartmell says—Oh, here they are, he and Mr. Williams. I am so glad they have come back in time to see you."

Through the open door Elaine viewed a couple of black figures crossing the compound.

"They have been a long way this afternoon," Mrs. Cartmell told her, "and I expect poor Mr. Williams will be tired. I sometimes feel rather worried about him; he is so delicate, and wears himself out over his study of the language. If he would only realize, as we are always telling him, that Rome wasn't built in a day—though I hate the word 'Rome,' it stinks in one's nostrils." Mrs. Cartmell

sniffed disgustedly, as though the stink were material.

When Mr. Cartmell and Mr. Williams entered, Elaine divined as much as observed the effect of her unexpected presence on the younger man. His weariness vanished at sight of her, his pale eyes shone in his thin, drawn face, and his hand trembled as it touched her own in greeting.

She said to herself: "That poor little wretch is in love with me!" and the conviction elated, entertained her mischievously. She laid herself out to be charming all round, feigned serious interest in mission matters, listened deferentially to Mr. Cartmell's description of the visit he and Mr. Williams had been paying to a particularly stubborn village, and how some pundit had persistently interrupted the preaching with blasphemous argument.

"Would you believe it," he went on, "the fellow actually asked me how I could have any faith in my own God, when He could not even save His own life, and on one occasion stole a donkey!"

Elaine nearly laughed, but she managed

to voice her sympathy with Mr. Cartmell's vexation. "It must be awfully trying," she said. "I can't think how you carry on so bravely, except that I suppose you know you are making headway in spite of all opposition."

She uttered the words parrot-wise, astonished that they should have come to her so glibly. Meanwhile Miss Stopford had minced in on her toes, bowing elaborately to Mrs. Taverner.

"And can you conceive what I overheard this morning?" she interposed eagerly. "I had occasion the other day to punish a boy in my class for pulling off the wings and legs of live flies, and I heard him this morning telling one of his schoolfellows that he had complained of my harshness to his father, who had advised him to forgo the amusement for the present, because as long as the English were in India they must be obeyed, but that they would shortly all be killed or turned out, and then he could do as he pleased!"

Mrs. Taverner expressed suitable horror at this example of seditious feeling; but all the while her attention was distracted by her consciousness of Mr. Williams's adoring gaze. She felt sorry for him; he looked so fragile, so pathetic. A mild flirtation would brighten him up. And how it would amaze Mrs. Beasley and all her scandal-mongering set, puzzle them, put them off the scent about her and Dick. They had cold-shouldered her of late; even the Wisemans had backed out of engagements with her and Dick.

She accepted an invitation to "take tea," and they all sat down to what Mrs. Cartmell termed "simple fare"—and very simple (and very nasty) it was! Elaine was not surprised that Mr. Williams ate nothing, as she herself toyed with a thick slab of toast spread with butter that looked like liquid lard melting in the heat. There was rhubarb jam in a battered tin, and a round Dutch cheese with a purple rind, hard as a football, of which Mr. Cartmell devoured chunks—so sustaining, as his wife remarked. If a man were not much of a meat eater, cheese was the right substitute for the system. She inquired if Mr. Taverner liked cheese.

"Oh, he likes anything," said Elaine, smiling. "He is far too much absorbed in

his work to notice what he eats." Her tone implied "or to notice anything else," and the implication reached the young missionary's comprehension, as she had intended that it should, though it escaped the attention of the rest of the company.

Harold Williams felt he was "behind the scenes." He knew what she had to put up with, how empty was her life. And the subtle allusion to their intimate talk during his visit to her on that memorable afternoon acted as a mental tonic; the confidential little glance that she threw him revived him as no amount of tea, or cheese, or "simple fare" could have done. He thought she looked like a beautiful bird among sparrows in the daintiness of her attire; her freshness and her sweetness, that stirred his emotions, went as strong wine to his head.

But his heart sank as she began to draw on her soft white gloves. She was going. What torture to feel that he did not know when he would see her again, and how humiliating that he should not be in a position to suggest another meeting! He could only sit helpless, humble and silent, while the Cartmells and Miss Stopford overloaded their guest with gratitude for her generous orders, her kind interest, obviously fishing for further favours as they petitioned to be allowed to chronicle her visit in their annual letter to a home magazine. She gave gracious permission, and then, to his astonished delight, he actually heard her suggesting that he should accompany her for a drive!

"Don't you think a little drive would do Mr. Williams good, Mrs. Cartmell?" she asked playfully, as though begging some indulgence for a child, and as Mrs. Cartmell hesitated he felt he could have hit her.

There came a momentary silence, broken by a snort of disapproval from Miss Stopford. Perhaps Mrs. Cartmell considered the snort to be somewhat of an impertinence; if anyone snorted it should have been herself or Mr. Cartmell. Miss Stopford therefore indirectly saved the situation, for Mrs. Cartmell said: "Well, she did not know why, if Mr. Williams could spare the time. After all, it was for him to decide."

There was little doubt about Mr. Williams's decision. He caught eagerly at

the proposal, in defiance of Mrs. Cartmell's hesitation and the snort of Miss Stopford. Mr. Cartmell had preserved a discreet neutrality.

"Thank you very much," he said, striving to conceal his excitement. "I should like a little fresh air, since you are so kind as to give me the opportunity, Mrs. Taverner."

He assumed an attitude of independence that he was far from feeling. Even yet he was not certain if somehow he might not be balked of this pleasure. He shook with agitation as he rose, ready to follow his divinity, if it were even to the ends of the earth. He did not feel safe till he was seated at her side in the comfortable little carriage, bowling along through the squalid bazaar, and out on to the hard white road, lined with shisham and mango trees, that gave forth an intoxicating fragrance.

Mrs. Taverner directed the coachman to drive past the club, and, to her secret satisfaction, they encountered Mrs. Beasley, whose trap was on the point of turning into the entrance. Mrs. Beasley was driving herself, and Mrs. Wiseman was with her. What luck! The two ladies stared at Mrs. Taverner, who

was in such unusual company, and they said something to each other. Elaine wished she could hear what it was! She waved to them brightly, and turned with an exaggerated air of attention to Mr. Williams as she asked him if there was any particular direction in which he would prefer to go. He said it was all the same to him.

"What about the river?" she suggested. "We might drive down as near as we can get and see what Captain Radgement is doing. I know he meant to try and shoot a crocodile this afternoon; the skins make such lovely bags and suit-cases. You remember Captain Radgement? He came that evening when you were having tea with me."

Of course he remembered Captain Radgement, remembered him with a jealous pang. He was Mrs. Taverner's friend, who knew her as he, Harold Williams, could never hope to know her. He longed to say that he did not in the least want to see what Captain Radgement was doing, but he had not the courage, and he murmured that he would be only too happy to go wherever she pleased. He supposed the captain must be a very good

shot? Was it dangerous sport, the killing of crocodiles?

"Oh, nothing like other big game shooting," she informed him. "Captain Radgement has bagged no end of tigers, generally on foot, besides buffaloes and bears and panthers. You should see his collection of skins and horns."

She spoke with a vicarious pride in her Dick's achievements, and Mr. Williams felt himself a worm, because the only weapon he had ever handled in his life was a pea-shooter in the days of his boyhood, when his aim had been directed against little birds, or fowls, other children, or helpless, irate old ladies.

"Crocodiles don't count," went on Mrs. Taverner loftily, "though they are a scourge to the natives." And she related hair-raising stories of how women and children disappeared at the religious bathing-places and in the creeks devoted to the washing of clothes—pulled under and devoured by the hideous reptiles. Not only that, but how scoundrels took advantage of the recognized danger. She gave him an instance. At one spot in the neighbourhood several women had disappeared

when bathing, and it was at first assumed that they had been dragged under by crocodiles, until it became known that all the victims had been wearing valuable jewellery, and the body of one of the women found floating in the water bore no marks of injury that could have been inflicted by a crocodile; only the jewels were gone, and the flesh was rent where they had been torn off. Subsequently it was discovered that a gang of rascals had been at work, thieves that haunted the bathing-place, dragging the women under the water to rob them of their jewels.

Williams shuddered. "How terrible to think," he said, "that they should have lost their lives, no matter how, while engaged in idolatrous practices!"

"But do you really believe," she asked, that it could make any difference—afterwards?"

"Oh, I hope not, I trust not," he replied distressfully. "But think of the poor souls! Think of their going ignorant into eternity!"

"But, after all, they were ignorant. It wasn't their fault."

"No!" he cried passionately, "it wasn't

their fault. It was ours. By now, if we English had worked harder, knowledge would have spread far more rapidly. So much valuable time has been wasted, such countless opportunities lost. It seems to me almost hopeless sometimes. India is so vast, idolatry is so strong, and we workers are so few!"

"But listen," she said, reverting to her argument. "Surely you can't believe that everyone who isn't a Christian must suffer for it when they die?"

He realized that up to this moment he had more or less believed it; but now the unfairness of such an assumption struck him with a new sense of doubt, and he did not know how to answer.

"I have been brought up as a Christian," she continued, "but I can't say my religion has ever meant as much to me as their religion must have meant to those poor women who went down to bathe in the Ganges, believing that their sins would be washed away, every act of whose lives was probably mixed up with their faith. If I were to die suddenly, do you think I should be given preference over them?"

"But you," he protested, his mind floundering, "you know the truth."

"Then it would be much worse for me if I did anything wrong!"

"You don't do anything wrong-you couldn't!"

"How do you know?"

She thought of Dick and of her marriage vows. Did she not love a man who was not her husband, and had she made any effort to fight that love? moreover, had she any intention of making such effort? What would this ardent disciple of their mutual religion think of her if he knew the truth? He would regard her as a traitor to her country and her national faith, one of those beings who "wasted time and opportunities"-perhaps not so much wasted as ignored them. Were bigger things to be taken into account above individual considerations? The whole question resolved itself into a personal application. Either she was a veritable sinner, past redemption, or she was not. Did it matter? Was Dick right when he talked of honour? Was she dragging Dick down against his will into the mire of sin and deception that might

swallow them up, just as the crocodiles or the robbers had destroyed these poor women in the midst of their devotions? Had she ever thought of Dick, not to speak of her disloyalty to Arnold? Conscience awoke and cried accusations.

She heard the gentle voice of her companion in her ear. "I know that if you did anything wrong you would be sorry."

"You haven't the least conception," she interrupted almost roughly, "of what temptation means!"

Hadn't he? He thought guiltily of that moment in his bedroom with her parcel, of all the wild visions that had assailed him; of his ecstasy when he found her this afternoon in the Cartmells' living-room, the sight of her beauty, the touch of her hand, and the joy that he could not resist as he sat by her side, driving through the warm, scented air.

Just then the carriage drew up beneath the trees of the grove at the edge of the plateau overlooking the river. Down below, as they alighted, they beheld a group of natives surrounding some object, and a tall English figure directing some operations. "Oh, look!" cried Elaine. "They have got a big crocodile—they are cutting him up. Let's go and see."

Hurriedly they left the carriage to slip and scramble down the face of the cliff, waded through sand till they arrived on the outskirts of a chattering concourse, from which Captain Radgement detached himself to greet them.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, obviously surprised as he looked from Mrs. Taverner to her companion. He was grimy with dust and sweat, and in the highest spirits as he pointed to the long, disembowelled corpse of a crocodile that gave forth a fearsome stench.

"Got him in one!" he said triumphantly; he never moved. And just look what we've found in his inside!"

He signalled to one of the helpers, who came forward with pride, his hands full of the tragic discoveries—a woman's necklace, one or two charms and talismans that had failed to preserve their owners from a horrible fate; a couple of little bangles that could only have encircled the wrists of a child. What a terrible story they told! And on the sand lay a heap of long, tangled black hair.

Williams turned faint. He had eaten next to nothing all day, and the excitement of the drive, not to speak of the doubts and the agitation aroused by his conversation with Mrs. Taverner, had unhinged his overstrung nerves. The heat, too, was awful, despite the lateness of the hour. All this, combined with the smell of the dead reptile and the sight of the gruesome relics, proved too much for him. Everything went dark and he reeled.

When he came to himself he saw Mrs. Taverner bending over him, concern in her eyes; she was dabbing his forehead with a wet handkerchief, and Captain Radgement stood by holding his sun hat upside down; it was filled with water. He realized that he was lying close to the edge of the river, well away from the spot where he had collapsed. felt curiously at peace, made no effort. was heavenly to feel the gentle hands touching his face, to see her eyes, her sweet eyes, gazing at him anxiously, to hear her voice, though it sounded far away: "There, you are better now, aren't you?"

A sense of shame and vexation broke in on the peace that enwrapt him. What a nuisance he must have been—still was. How foolish he must have looked—as if he were tipsy! He smiled weakly at the thought. Then he began to apologize, and tried to struggle to his feet. Captain Radgement gave him a helping hand, saying kindly:

"All right, old chap, steady on; there's no hurry. Catch hold of me."

Perforce he clung to the strong arm, for though now he was standing upright, the river seemed to rise and whirl above his head, a mist swam before his eyes, and he took stumbling steps in the sand. His feet felt like lumps of lead. Just as they turned towards the cliff the mist cleared, and he saw, as if hanging betwixt earth and heaven, the figure of the fakir. The bloodshot eves were fixed upon him, seemed to pierce his soul, to convey some intangible, malignant message as the cry rang out: "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" And some other voice re-echoed the cry. Could it have been his own? Williams looked helplessly into the handsome brown face bent towards him and repeated: "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

"Chup rao, you old brute!" Captain

Radgement was speaking angrily to the servant of Satan. Quite right!

"Chup rao," repeated Williams. That meant "Shut up—be silent." How excellent to feel that he was progressing so fast with the language. Soon he would be able to preach and exhort, hold his own when idolaters argued in support of their false faiths, perhaps even outstrip Mr. Cartmell in the force of his example and rhetoric. These women and children who had been eaten by crocodiles—the necklace and the bangles and the long black hair. Darkness descended again; faintly he heard Captain Radgement saying something—something about the carriage.

He knew no more till he found himself lying on his bed at the mission house, feeble, unable to stir. He was conscious of Mrs. Cartmell's presence; she was forcing him to swallow some liquid from a cup; he wished she would leave him alone, not worry him.

Captain Radgement and Mrs. Taverner left the mission house with mutual relief.

"Thank goodness we got him back safely, poor little fellow," said Elaine. "I hope they'll look after him properly; but they seem to live in such discomfort. And their food! We had the most awful tea this afternoon. I must send him some soup and jellies; it's the least I can do!"

She spoke as though she were to blame for the young missionary's collapse, and indeed she felt culpable, knowing in her heart that she had taken Mr. Williams for the drive ostensibly for his benefit, but in reality to feed her own vanity, though, of course, she could not have known it was to end in disaster for him.

"Why the least you can do?" queried Dick, puzzled by this note in her voice of self-accusation. "The soup and the jellies will no doubt be a God-send to him, but it wasn't your fault that he fainted. According to Mrs. Cartmell, he has been over-taxing his strength ever since he arrived in India. There was bound to be a climax sooner or later, and for him it was a piece of luck that it happened when it did; otherwise you might never have known of his breakdown."

She made no answer. Not even to Dick could she explain how she felt. And she kept

remembering Mr. Williams's fervid assertion: "But you don't do anything wrong." Everything she did seemed to be wrong!

"He is a good man," she said irrelevantly. "He is doing his best."

"I dare say he is; but he is doing it in a stupid sort of way."

"That's better than not doing it at all. Look here, Dick," she added, "I'm beginning to think—"

"Yes-to think what?"

"Well, that perhaps I'm not doing my best—my best by you and Arnold. You have often said we weren't playing the game——"

" Elaine!"

"Yes, there you go!" she exclaimed irritably. "As long as I am ready to continue our—well, we can hardly call it a liaison, can we?—you talk about honour and deception and all the rest of it. But directly I show any sign of agreeing with you, you say "Elaine!" as if I were to blame for the whole thing."

"You know that was not what I meant. I'd throw everything to the winds for your sake, if only it were possible." "I suppose the fact of the matter is," said Elaine crossly, "that we ought either to part or make up our minds to bolt."

She stared ahead, but in spite of the hardness she assumed her lips trembled. Dick ached to gather her in his arms, to urge her to go away with him. Why shouldn't they take their chance? Other people had done it. thousands of couples, and they couldn't all have repented it, couldn't all have come hopelessly to grief. Now that her attitude towards the situation seemed to be changing, the bare thought of parting from her was more than he could endure. At the moment they were driving along the high road, in full view of all the passers-by, and he could not even take her hand without fear of observation. He could only sit wretched, sorely tried, knowing that sooner or later some decision must be made.

"Perhaps I'd better go to the hills," went on Elaine dismally. "I know you can't ask for leave this year, and that if either of us goes away it will have to be me."

She paused, in the certain expectation that he would entreat her to stay. Then, of course, if she yielded, Dick would be to blame. But, to her indignant surprise, he was silent. He was thinking of Elaine in a hill station, surrounded by admirers who had nothing to do but amuse themselves. Would she forget him? He knew he ought to hope that she might, but he did not believe she would. There was no doubt in his mind but that Elaine loved him, and how dearly he loved Elaine no one but himself would ever know. What suffering lay ahead for them both!

"We can't settle anything now," he temporized.

"Of course not," she snapped. "There's plenty of time. You are always in such a hurry!"

He let the unfounded accusation go by, understanding her mental disturbance. His poor little love! No wonder she was perverse and unjust, when it was his fault entirely that she was placed in such a predicament. At the very first sign of danger he ought to have looked into the future, avoided her, gone away, done anything rather than have permitted this thing to happen.

Now Elaine was crying quietly, chiefly

from a sense of grievance because Dick had not so much as said one word in opposition to her proposal.

"Oh, darling," he besought her, "don't

cry. I simply can't bear it."

"Oh, what are we to do?" she sobbed.

"Let's leave it," he suggested desperately, at any rate for the present."

"Shall we? Well, perhaps—" said Elaine, half doubtful, half relieved. "But I feel such a pig, though I don't think I am altogether a pig. That little missionary upset me this afternoon. Dick, do you think we are really very bad sinners? When he talked about eternity, and believing, and being saved I got horribly uncomfortable. I began to think I had never done anything right in my life."

"It's I who am the sinner," declared Dick. "I ought to urge you to leave the station, as I can't go myself. I ought to do all in my power to help you to forget me. But how can I—how can I?"

The carriage swept through the gates of the Taverner compound, drew up under the portico.

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"I am just as bad—worse, in a way," said Elaine ruefully, "because I'm married. Shall we try not seeing so much of each other, only meet in public when we can't help it, not write notes, or—or kiss, or anything of that sort? Then perhaps we should feel better; we should know we were trying."

"Very well," said Dick, as he helped her from the carriage and his hand lingered in hers. "We can but see how it answers."

His voice was full of misery, and he turned abruptly to walk away with a heavy heart, leaving her standing to watch him disappear in the sudden Indian dusk that drops like a curtain.

## CHAPTER X

THE good resolutions lasted for about a fortnight. Dick and Elaine saw each other at polo and cricket matches, on the public tennisground, met at occasional "At Homes," and for Elaine these encounters brought a certain thrill of excitement apart from the painful pleasure they both felt when they could look into each other's eyes, just touch hands, exchange a few commonplace words that the whole world might hear.

The obvious astonishment of Mrs. Beasley and her friends was a source of impish delight to Elaine, who knew they were all wondering what had happened, asking among themselves if Captain Radgement and Mrs. Taverner could have quarrelled. She missed Dick's companionship sharply, yet she was upheld by a feeling of self-righteousness, sustained also by the knowledge that Dick missed her equally, was miserable; she welcomed the light in his eyes when he saw her, the way in

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which he watched her, made little excuses to be near her whenever the chance arose. Understanding was theirs, and their love grew no less; if anything, it grew stronger. Elaine thought of Dick always, while she threw herself diligently into her housekeeping duties, when she gave her attention to Arnold and practised patience with his absent-minded moods and irregular hours. She noticed for the first time that he was not eating or sleeping normally, that he was becoming more and more absorbed in his private work. Sometimes when he sat up later than usual she would take him a cup of soup, sit on the edge of his chair to see that he consumed it; once or twice at night she found him pacing the compound practically in his sleep, muttering texts from the Vedas, and gently she cajoled him to bed with a motherly sense of care. He was always polite and grateful for her little ministrations, always considerate, anxious lest she should be losing her rest on his account; and she began to flatter herself that Arnold would fare badly without her, would miss her, even though unconsciously, were she to leave him. . . .

And she had another object of charity. Poor little Mr. Williams, who did not seem to get on at all. Daily she drove down to the mission house, bearing dainties to tempt him, sat by his bedside and listened sympathetically to his self-recriminations—how he felt such a failure, so useless, lying there an expense to the mission, doing no good. It gave her solace in her own trouble to see how he revived when she entered his comfortless room, how he hung on her every word, gazing at her with sunken, grateful eyes, clinging to her hand when she left him. It was impossible to resist such pathetic adoration, and she could not disappoint him of the daily visit. She felt impatient with Mrs. Cartmell, who was of opinion that there was nothing radically wrong with Mr. Williams, that he had just "let go" for the time being. She declared frankly that Mrs. Taverner was only encouraging his fancies.

"He had better go back to England," she said to Mrs. Taverner one evening; "he has bitten off more than he can swallow; a man of his miserable physique ought never to have undertaken mission work in India. And

unless I am much mistaken, there's something else at work keeping him back!"

She stared significantly at Mrs. Taverner, unwilling to put her suspicion into words in view of the value of the visitor's orders to the needlework class. She would have liked to say that Mr. Williams was unwholesomely attracted by his fascinating friend, and Elaine, scenting her meaning, resented the hint.

"You think I am doing him no good?" she asked quietly, as they stood in the hot, dusty compound preparatory to her departure.

"Well, if you ask me, I think the less he sees of you the better for him," said Mrs. Cartmell, avoiding her gaze. "You must remember that you are not of our world. It can be no real pleasure to you to come and sit with him as you do, and it only excites him. Send him soup and jellies and little comforts by all means, but keep away from him yourself. He is only a boy, and he doesn't understand—"

Elaine felt furious. What an evil-minded woman! Ready to detect harm where no harm existed. It was preposterous!

"Very well, then," she responded coldly,

"if that is your view, perhaps I'd better not come any more. Of course I will continue to send the 'little comforts,' which, I hope, you will see that he receives."

With this parting shot she got into her carriage, feeling rebuffed, insulted, paying no heed to Mrs. Cartmell's flurried expostulations. She had not intended to discourage Mrs. Taverner's kind attentions; of course, Mrs. Taverner had been actuated solely by the best motives; it was only that Mr. Williams was so unsophisticated, he might have mistaken her goodness to him for a deeper interest. . . .

Elaine nearly laughed aloud. "You had better tell him," she said with acid civility, "what you have in your mind, explain that you consider he would be better without my visits. I should not like him to think that I had tired of coming to see him."

"That is putting me in a very awkward position, Mrs. Taverner." Mrs. Cartmell bit her lips; she was repenting her rash insinuations. "Couldn't you just come now and then—not quite so often? I have only Mr. Williams's welfare at heart, after all; and isn't it

much better to say what one thinks rather than risk misunderstandings?"

"It depends on the thoughts," said Elaine pointedly; "and as you have put yours into words, I will leave you to take the consequences."

With that she got into her carriage and drove off, angry with Mrs. Cartmell and sincerely sorry for Mr. Williams, for now she could hardly, with any self-respect, continue her visits to the sick man, and she knew how he would miss them. She would miss them herself, for the daily pilgrimage had helped to fill up her time, had given her something to think of during the trial of her comparative separation from Dick.

More than ever she longed for Dick as she drove back to the big bungalow in the hot evening sunshine. When she arrived the rooms seemed so silent, a sinister silence. Arnold had not returned from the courts; the servants were all half asleep; she had no engagement; she did not know what to do with herself. . . . She tried to write mail letters. No good; she could think of nothing to say, and she always hated writing to her stepmother

and her sisters. She threw down her pen and wandered aimlessly about. The heat was insufferable, yet she was unable to sit still under the punkah. She began to think what a fool she had been to listen to her conscience and cut herself off from Dick's company, the one thing in the world that could give her pleasure and comfort! Her whole outlook felt dislocated; when she tried to do right she was wretched. Why not do wrong and be happy? Why bother about her soul or a future life, or anything but the present? Who could say if there was any future life? Nobody knew anything for certain, from the most exalted bishop down to the meanest coolie. It was all supposition. . . . She picked up a copy of Omar Khayyam from the table, that human old reveller in sin, opened it at random, and read lines that fitted her mood exactly:

"Oh! take the cash and let the credit go, Nor heed the murmur of a distant drum."

She had only to lift up her finger and things would be the same again between her and Dick, the only human being on earth who really understood and loved her. . . . She

would write to him, tell him that she could endure this state of affairs no longer, that they must meet as of old, and let all moral considerations go hang!

But hardly had she seated herself again at the writing-table to fulfil her intention, when a servant came in with a letter on a salver, and her heart leapt as she recognized Dick's handwriting on the envelope. Her hands shook as she tore it open to read:

"I must see you alone. Something has happened. Tell me when and where I could meet you without fear of interruption."

A moment's thought, then hastily, her pulses racing, she scribbled her answer: "I will be at the farther end of the compound to-night, under the neem trees. At eleven o'clock."

Controlling her face and her hands, she gave the note to the waiting servant, and when he had left the room she threw herself on the sofa, burying her head in the cushions, her whole being athrill. What could the "something" be that had happened? Whatever it was, she would feel Dick's arms about her once more in a few hours. . . .

For the rest of the evening she was possessed with a wild excitement, chattered ceaselessly to Arnold during dinner, unable to keep silence, talked about the garden and the horses, about Mr. Williams, told him Mrs. Cartmell had been so rude she could never go near the mission house again. She waited for no answers, did not notice that Arnold ate nothing, that if possible he was more dreamy and distrait than usual; neither did she notice that he looked really ill. She could see nothing, hear nothing, but Dick's face and Dick's voice.

When Arnold left the room, his head bent, his hands behind his back, she danced into the drawing-room to sit down at the piano with a zest she had not felt for weeks. She sang song after song, played waltzes and all the gayest selections she could remember, unwitting of the heat, indifferent to the onslaughts of mosquitoes that buzzed and pinged about her head and arms and ankles. . . .

Now it was ten o'clock—only an hour more! She closed the piano and went into her bedroom, gazed at herself in the big silver-framed mirror. . . . Yes, she was looking "all

right," and she nodded approval at her fair reflection—though Dick wouldn't care what she looked like, even if he could see her properly in the moonlight! How lucky that the moon was full to-night. She went to the open doorway and looked out. The compound was bathed in a golden light, so serene and so still that it might have been artificial, a vast stage setting; the scent from a flowering shrub with trumpet-shaped blossoms was strong, and she drew in the fragrance with a little shiver of delight. Curiosity as to what Dick had to tell her had long since subsided; all she could think of was the fact that she would be with him, alone, irked by no need for pretence or restraint. She hummed a refrain of a song:

"You might entreat the sun to cease to shine, As seek to stay so great a love as mine."

The moments passed slowly, so slowly! She tip-toed along the veranda to the farther end of the bungalow, and peeped through a split-cane blind into Arnold's sanctum. He was sitting at his table, but, for a wonder, he was not writing or reading; he was leaning forward, his elbows on the table, his head on his hands. Was he asleep? She stood watch-

ing him, holding her breath. How still he was! A sinister possibility darted through her mind; she felt she must make sure, satisfy herself. Gently she lifted the blind, and crept beneath it into the room, paused behind his chair. . . .

Her relief was immense when she caught the sound of his breathing, though it was almost inaudible. Supposing Arnold had been dead! She did not want him to die; such a thought had never once entered her mind, it had never occurred to her that Arnold might die—and yet? Horrified, aghast at herself, she waited for a few moments, glancing about the room. What piles of papers, what heaps of books. The slow swaying of the punkah stirred the papers with little fidgeting sounds.

Some small animal ran along the edge of the matting . . . and then Arnold sighed deeply. Fearful lest he should awake and find her there, she slid cautiously from the room, gave one backward glance. . . . He was still sound asleep; and as she ran back along the veranda the gong from the guard-house boomed out the first stroke of the hour—eleven o'clock!

Lightly, swiftly she sped across the lawn towards the line of trees that she had named as the trysting-place, and a figure advanced from the shadows to meet her. At last she was in Dick's arms, clinging to him as though she could never let him go.

A little later they were seated side by side on the roots of a tree, holding each other's hands, and reason returned.

"Now then, tell me—what was it you wanted to say?" Elaine inquired with a contented sigh.

"Something awfully unexpected has happened. The English mail came in this morning—" he hesitated.

"Well, that isn't so very unexpected?"

"No; but the news it brought me-"

Her heart stood still. "Oh, Dick-you aren't going home?"

"An old uncle of mine has died," he said baldly. "I knew I must have the title some day, but the place wasn't entailed, and none of us guessed that he had any money to speak of. It seems that he was very rich, and he has left everything to me!"

The news dumbfounded, terrified her.

Now Dick would go away, and she would never, never see him again!

"I must congratulate you," she said stiffly, drawing herself from his embrace.

"But don't you see," he cried eagerly, it just makes all the difference!"

"Yes, of course, to you."

"To us both. Elaine—there is nothing now to prevent us—"

As she grasped his meaning a great joy flooded her being.

"Oh, Dick, is it really true?"

"Perfectly true," he replied exultantly. "I can take you away. We can snap our fingers at the world!"

"But—" she faltered, with a sudden recollection of the sleeping figure within the bungalow.

"But what?"

"There is Arnold; he would miss me\_\_\_"

"He would wish you to be happy!"

"I know he would, and that makes it worse. What am I to do?"

Doubt and temptation tormented her. She thought wildly of the little missionary's words, seemed to hear his gentle voice: "I know if you did anything wrong you would be sorry." Ought she to surrender this chance of earthly happiness? What real difference would it make to Arnold, or to anyone else, save herself and Dick, if she followed her own inclinations, took the step that Dick urged, now that all had been rendered so easy by circumstance? If she decided to stay with Arnold, Dick would go home, a rich man, perhaps marry and forget her!

Now Dick was holding her to him, whispering words of love and persuasion.

"It was the only thing that stood in our way, my being so poor. Don't you want to come with me? Elaine—Elaine!" He divined hesitation in her silence. "All I have in the world is yours. I will give my whole life to you. Think how happy we should be—think of it!"

And as she thought of it, yielding, almost consenting, a sound that reached her strained senses prematurely made her look towards the house. Arnold! Arnold was descending the veranda steps.

"Oh, look!" she breathed, terrified.

For two or three seconds they remained

motionless, and the beating of their hearts sounded loud to them both.

Taverner crossed the path, moved slowly on to the lawn; he appeared to be making straight for the spot where they stood beneath the trees.

"Quick," she whispered, "come farther back."

They withdrew deeper into the shadows, their eyes fixed on the approaching figure.

"Keep still. Perhaps he won't see us. I expect he is half asleep."

The advancing footsteps became audible; slow, heavy footsteps. On he came, till he was within a few yards of their hiding-place. The tension was terrible while it lasted. Though Taverner's head was bent, his eyes stared forward, and Elaine saw that he was not wearing his glasses, also that his face was dead white and set. . . . And as she watched him pass, go through the gap in the boundary behind the trees, her heart smote her sharply. Once more came the echo of a gentle, confident voice as though floating towards her in the hot, still night: "You don't do anything wrong—you couldn't!" And again: "I

know if you did anything wrong you would be sorry——''

Conscience clamoured that she should stay with Arnold, tend him, do her part, do what was right without question or argument. The fundamental goodness that lay beneath the shallows of her nature rose swiftly to the surface, and all thought of self fell away. With a burst of tears she turned from Dick, trembling, sobbing.

"It's no good, Dick," she said; "I can't do it. I've got to stay with Arnold. He's my husband; he wants me."

"But, darling—" he began, in consternation.

"Don't—don't say anything more. It's no use; I can't do it."

"Wait till to-morrow," he urged. "It will all seem different—"

She laid her hand on his arm. "Dick, I've quite made up my mind. You know I love you—I shall always love you, even if I never see you again."

"And what about me?" he interposed angrily. "Don't you think at all of what I shall suffer?"

"But I do, I do!" she cried in an agony of distress, "though it's different for you. You haven't any ties, anyone else to consider."

He stood mute, bewildered, indignant. It had never crossed his mind that in the altered circumstances she would hesitate to join her life with his, and now, unwitting as he was of the change that had come over her spirit, she seemed to him faithless, unreasonable, deserving of reproach.

"I can't explain," she told him hopelessly. "I know you must think me selfish, unfair, but, indeed, for once I am not thinking of myself. I only feel that I must stay with Arnold. Dick, if you love me, try not to misjudge me—do help me instead!"

Pity and remorse overtook him with a glimmering of her feelings, and a new element of deference towards her decision began to mingle with his bitter disappointment, an attitude that grew as he realized that honour, reverence were due to her, not blame; that in casting reproaches he was playing a poor part, unworthy of his love. He strove to enter into

and respect her point of view; but what hardship, what desolation for them both!

She misinterpreted his silence. "Oh, Dick," she besought him sorrowfully, "do try to understand!"

He caught her in his arms—for the last time, as he told himself penitently. Was it not good-bye?

"My heart, don't think I blame you—but oh, my God!"

They clung to each other in silent misery, and a few moments later, from the shadow of the trees, he watched her flit across the lawn, a little white wraith in the moonlight, to disappear into the house.

For an hour he stood, sunk in despair, before he could bring himself to leave the spot that had been the scene of their farewell.

## CHAPTER XI

Having seen Mrs. Taverner drive away from the mission house that afternoon, Mrs. Cartmell turned back into the bungalow filled with indignation against "that butterfly," as in her thoughts she named Mr. Williams's late visitor, who had taken her well-intentioned advice in such bad part.

She felt she had perhaps been injudicious, said rather too much; all the same, she had but done what she considered was best for the sick man in her charge, and, besides, it was unthinkable that she should be expected to countenance anything in the form of a flirtation beneath her roof! She was righteously angry with Mrs. Taverner, annoyed with the weak-willed Williams, who ought to know better! She despised his lack of physical and mental force, had no patience with such a feeble specimen of manhood, at any rate within missionary circles. Her whole heart and mind were, so to speak, "in the business,"

as were her husband's and Miss Stopford's, and it was too bad that they should have been saddled with anyone like Mr. Williams, who was totally unfitted for the strenuous life. . . .

By the time Mrs. Cartmell reached the living-room she was boiling over with vexation and a sense of personal injury, and it was a relief to find Miss Stopford sitting there sorting piles of plain sewing completed by the needlework class that day. She poured out her feelings freely to her colleague.

"In my opinion," said Miss Stopford, when she could snatch a chance of speaking, "there is not much the matter with young Mr. Williams beyond nerves, pure and simple. A little plain speaking would do him all the good in the world; it is what hysterical people require and so seldom receive. If I were you I should tell him to get up and dress. He will remain in bed moping and looking for Mrs. Taverner's visits for ever if he is permitted to do so."

"Mrs. Taverner isn't coming again," announced Mrs. Cartmell. "I gave the fair lady a piece of my mind this afternoon, and she went off in a huff. I suppose now she'll

pay me out by stopping her orders, but that's nothing against the mischief she was doing that wretched little man. Of all the selfish, frivolous mortals—not to say downright wicked—"

"Does Mr. Williams know she is not coming to see him again?" inquired Miss Stopford, with interested relish.

"Not yet; and I expect there will be a fine to-do to-morrow when she fails to appear, with her flowers and her puddings, and smelling as she does of powder and scent. It quite nauseates me to go into his room after she has been sitting there!"

"Would it not be advisable to let him know he need not expect her?" suggested Miss Stopford, who never clipped her words, as did Mrs. Cartmell, in speaking. "He might then think better of remaining in bed."

"I've a good mind to do it. I'm inclined to think you are right—that there isn't much wrong with him but nerves. Fancy, nerves in a missionary! Where should we all be, I should like to know, if we indulged in nerves. He must be sent back to England; there's no question about it!"

There was something to be said for Mrs. Cartmell's irritation. Though by no means a hard-hearted woman, she lacked the divine gift of sympathy, and her life was so filled with duties, both domestic and professional, that the care of a weakling, who had not the excuse of being a native, was a drain on her time and attention that she could ill afford. She and her husband had applied for an assistant, the work being more than they could accomplish satisfactorily without further help; and though they had been prepared for an interval of training before the new-comer could be of real use, they had not bargained for such a failure as had been foisted upon themnot that Mr. Williams lacked ardour and enthusiasm; it was simply that he physically unequal to the work he had undertaken.

Mrs. Cartmell made up her mind that it was but her plain duty to tackle Mr. Williams forthwith, and, fortified by Miss Stopford's approval, she entered his bedroom with determined purpose. He was lying flat, inert. She controlled her desire to shake him as he groaned when she asked him how he was feel-

ing. To her disgust she observed that he was holding to his breast some flowers Mrs. Taverner had brought him.

"Look here, my dear boy," she began briskly, "this won't do, you know. You must pull yourself together. Self-discipline is so important in a case like yours. Come, come, don't you think you could get up for supper? If you would only make an effort, I am sure you would feel a different creature."

She seated herself on the narrow bed, avoiding his toes that formed a little peak beneath the sheet. The punkah coolie (there were none too many of such luxuries at the mission house) had absconded, and the heat of the room was severe.

"I will get up if you wish me to do so," said Mr. Williams meekly.

"It is not what I wish, but what would seem best for you," she told him; "and I honestly think you would be better in the larger room, with more air, and company to distract your attention from yourself."

She stooped to pick up a white object that had caught her eye on the floor. It was a little handkerchief, violet scented, with an "E" embroidered elaborately in the corner. Incensed, she dropped it again.

"And I also think honestly," she continued, "that it is a good thing Mrs. Taverner has decided to cease her visits!"

Mr. Williams "sat up" morally and physically.

"What did you say?" he asked loudly. "What do you mean?"

Aha, that had roused him! He was not so weak as he would make out; his voice was quite strong, and he was able to raise himself without effort.

- "She was doing you no good; you know that as well as I do!"
- "Did you tell her not to come?" He gazed at her, rage and dismay in his eyes.
  - "I advised it, certainly."
  - "And she agreed?"
  - "She said she should not come again."

To Mrs. Cartmell's surprise, Mr. Williams made no comment.

"So far so good," she told herself, and waited for him to speak again. When he did so it was to announce his intention of dress-

ing, if Mrs. Cartmell would be kind enough to leave his room:

"That's right!" she said cheerfully. "I will send the bearer to help you, and I must make that wretched punkah coolie come back till you are ready to join us in the living-room. He is an extra hand, you know, and I am sure you wouldn't wish to cause more expense to the mission than can be avoided. We have to be so careful."

"Yes, of course, I understand."

He seemed feverishly anxious for her departure. And well pleased with the result of her "plain speaking," Mrs. Cartmell went off to summon the bearer and recapture the truant punkah coolie, who was smoking and gossiping in the servants' quarters, oblivious of his temporary duties.

Mr. Williams was quite brilliant at the supper table. True, he ate nothing, only drank quantities of water, but he made up for it by his readiness to converse. He and Mr. Cartmell talked "shop" delightfully; it was difficult to believe that Mr. Williams had ever been ailing. Mrs. Cartmell congratulated herself on the success of her cure, and her

spirits rose, so that it was quite a pleasant evening. Mr. Williams looked wonderfully better; he had a bright colour in his cheeks, and his eyes actually sparkled! She decided to refrain for the present from broaching the subject of his leaving them; it would seem rather unkind to spring that upon him on the top of her previous chiding, and, besides, she must first talk the matter over with "Mr. Cartmell."

Apparently Mr. Williams was enjoying himself so much that he showed no disposition to retire for the night, and they all sat up later than usual. Mrs. Cartmell had at last to draw his attention to the clock, especially as he had grown more and more excited and was inclined to talk nonsense, which she attributed to his being tired. She said it was time they were all in bed.

"But we've only just finished breakfast!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Cartmell and Miss Stopford exchanged amused glances.

"Well, anyway, it's time for a rest. Off you go, my friend! Pleasant dreams and sweet repose."

Mrs. Cartmell hustled him away, and was secretly entertained when he made her a formal bow on reaching the door.

"Poor little chap," she remarked, when he had disappeared, and she began her final "tidy up." "The effort of dressing and all the talking has been rather too much for him; but I'm glad he made the effort, and he won't be any the worse to-morrow. He has plenty of grit in him, and it's such a pity he is not more robust in body."

"He looks to me very ill," said Mr. Cartmell, doubtfully, "and he did not touch his food."

"Oh, don't worry about him, dear. It's all nerves. When he feels hungry he will eat. He was just a little light-headed to-night—only natural after lying in bed for so long. You'll see, he'll be quite himself in the morning. I put a glass of milk in his room and a biscuit before we began supper, so if he wants nourishment there it is."

She turned out the lamps.

A little later silence fell on the bungalow, a hot silence, broken only by the squeak of the punkah ropes and a faint murmur of voices from the kitchen quarters.

Mr. and Mrs. Cartmell lay soundly asleep, also Miss Stopford, but Harold Williams sat wakeful, fully dressed, on the edge of his bed, his mind working deliriously, obsessed with the desire to discover why Mrs. Taverner should have decided to desert him. He could not believe that she had made the decision of her own free will; he must hear the truth from her lips—surely, surely she could never be so cruel. Mrs. Cartmell had told lies, lies, lies! He would be even with her, go to Mrs. Taverner, ask her. . . .

He fondled the flowers she had brought him that afternoon; the scent of them strengthened his determination. Then he espied a small white patch on the floor, and picked it up—her handkerchief, hers! He pressed it to his forehead, to his lips, inhaling the fragrance. Cunningly he listened, his poor disordered brain and senses afire. Nobody was about; they were all asleep. Was it morning or evening? He did not know, did not care; whatever the hour, he must go to her, beg her not to discard him utterly.

With caution he crept to the door that led into the veranda, looked out. What a bright light! Was it the moon or the sun? Anyway, what matter! He tip-toed through the doorway, down the steps, and stood exultant, free, breathing the hot, dusty air, waving his arms as he went on over the bare, hard ground. Once out of the compound, he ran, ran stealthily like a thief, through the sleeping bazaar till he reached the high road that would lead him to her dwelling-place. . . .

Suddenly he halted. Something told him that she was not in her house, that she was awaiting him down by the river. Yes, of course, she had gone down to the river to see what she could do to help those poor ignorant women, to save them from a cruel death, save their souls and their bodies—poor things, poor things! Quick, quick! he must not be too late to do his part. . . .

### CHAPTER XII

It was a very still night, one of those breathless, hot-weather nights that presage the breaking of the monsoon.

For the past week great clouds had been massing on the horizon like mighty armies, now closing up as though to advance in force, now splitting asunder with low rumbles of discontent, again dispersing, again uniting, filling the air with a stifling heat. The full moon hung orange-red, low in the sky; and to Harold Williams the angry light, the silence, the oppression, were benumbing to consciousness. As he trod the loose sand of the river bank half his being felt broken away; yet he tramped on with dogged persistence, yearning for tranquillity of body and soul, a prey to the restless desire that had driven him forth into the night.

The passion to which he had succumbed racked his brain. He held out his arms and cried: "Elaine! Elaine!" and the sound of

his voice, that echoed against the cliff and went wandering over the water, filled him with fear. It seemed to be answered by another sound, rolling from the spit of sand in the distance, a hoarse, muffled note like the lowing of cattle.

He stood still for a moment to listen, straining his eyes and his ears. He saw the long mound of sand stretching out into the river, and on it the thick, log-shaped forms. What he heard was the bellowing of crocodiles. The heavy shapes moved sluggishly, indistinctly, making love in their own horrible fashion, stirred to utterance just as he, a human being, had been impelled into calling aloud the name of the woman he worshipped. The bald recognition seemed to hold him to earth, degrade him, yet he felt no shame, rather a species of animal sympathy with the noisome reptiles that squirmed and called, urged by the self-same instinct.

His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth; he found himself watching his own shadow with a fantastic fascination. He stepped this way and that, and an insane impulse possessed him to fling off his clothes and plunge into the turgid river that flowed at his feet so regardless of his suffering. This impulse increased his wretchedness, and wildly he danced, danced to and fro, muttering in chorus with the lustful sounds that rose and fell in the hot night air. Fighting the temptation, he lurched along the wet margin, picturing his dead body, swollen and horrible, floating on the surface of the water, as he had seen the carcases of cattle and human corpses riding on the current, half-submerged in mid-stream, tainting the air with the odour of death and decay. Each step was a stupendous effort; his shoes were heavy with mud, and as he stumbled he felt that his strength was failing. Soon he might sink helpless, perhaps to be washed down alive to the bank of sand where the long, hungry shapes were waiting.

A cry arrested his difficult progress, a familiar, monotonous cry, and he welcomed it in his solitude and fear.

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

He took it as a personal summons, and turned from the river to behold the fakir seated motionless, erect, in the orange-red light of the moon. He shambled exhaustedly towards the ash-smeared figure and sank on his knees before it, digging his hands deep in the sand.

For a space he knelt there, gazing up into the fixed, inscrutable face and muttering abjectly.

The words left his lips uncontrolled by his will: "Sita Ram!" again and again, "Sita Ram!"

And as he gazed and muttered a strange light seemed to illumine the gaunt body, an unearthly light, that played about the head and shoulders, transforming it, till to his mesmerized vision it assumed the outline of a female form. Softly, slowly the gorgon-like head and the skeleton limbs melted away, and he was prostrating himself at the feet, the little white feet, of the woman he adored. Slender and white, she leaned towards him, her delicate hands out-held, her hair a golden halo, her eyes blessing him tenderly with her love. His spirit floated in rapture. She was speaking; he drew himself up to catch the words.

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

The light faded, went out, and once more he was scrabbling in the sand, a weak, despicable mortal, held to the spot by fierce, bloodshot eyes set deep in a hateful, unnatural countenance.

Horrified, he squirmed backwards, recoiling like some helpless animal from the evil fascination of a reptile; tried desperately to pray, to make the sign of the Cross. And little by little he shook off the spell, recovered control of his limbs, stood upright and drew in long breaths of the hot, still air, shaking from head to foot.

Something had snapped in his brain. No longer was he Harold Williams, ardent disciple, servant of God, but some kind of devil possessed him with a frenzied desire to kill, to kill whom—that ogre seated behind him? Surely it would be easy enough. A sudden blow between the wicked eyes, fingers about the emaciated throat, a gasp and a struggle! Or would it be Elaine, whose death, with his, would unite them for ever? In fancy he bore her sweet body far into the deep waters that would close over their heads, their arms interlocked, never to be parted.

The impulse to kill, to destroy, made him stamp viciously on something that moved beneath his feet in the wet sand, something that wriggled and writhed, and the flat head of a snake rose, hissing, as it slithered forward to escape with an arrow-like dart. He heard it ripple swiftly into the water.

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" The invocation echoed about him, but no longer was he drawn by it, and he plodded on without purpose.

Someone else was walking at the foot of the cliff, slowly, dreamily, like a blind man. Williams paused to observe the solitary wanderer; then, with a craving for companionship, he turned his steps to meet the wanderer, and recognized the judge.

Taverner walked past him, oblivious of his presence, and he followed. Quietly the two figures moved forward, one behind the other, their footsteps hardly audible in the soft sand. On and on, till they came to the groin of silt that ran from the cliff far out into the river.

Williams halted. His mind cleared, worked rapidly, concentrating on the remembrance that on the other side of this natural dam the water flowed close to the cliff, and that for some distance farther there was prac-

tically no shore. Did the man ahead of him also remember it?

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

The voice of the fakir floated faintly from afar, and again a murderous devil awoke within him to whisper: "Wait! Wait!"

He trembled with a terrible emotion. There before his eyes, perhaps advancing to destruction, was the one being—Elaine's husband—who stood between him and the fulfilment of his inextinguishable longing.

Taverner walked on. The incline of the sand bank was so gentle that it afforded little reminder such as might have aroused him to a perception of his danger, and steadily he mounted the easy slope. A few steps more and he would be at the top. Williams felt his teeth chattering; saliva dropped from his mouth. He was filled with a diabolical exultation. This man deserved death. Was he not a pagan, and, moreover, harsh to his wife, that adorable being who had given her love to him—to him, Harold Williams?

A moment's hesitation, and then in a frenzy he rushed up the bank and flung himself on the moving figure.

There was no struggle; the surprise had been too complete, too sudden. A dull splash, a loud cry reverberated through the stillness of the night, and Williams was standing alone on the summit of the sand bank, breathless, triumphant.

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" he shouted, and fell to capering in ape-like glee.

At the end of the spit there was a movement; a couple of log-shaped forms slipped into the water.

He turned and ran down the slope, ran wildly along the edge of the river, plunging through the sand. He was making for an object that showed dimly white in the moon-light—the fakir. Arrived, he stood still, shook his fist in the dreadful, impassive face.

"You know English, you understand, you devil, you idolater. Listen! You sit here and beg, a parasite, a drone, evil, evil! Listen! Your friend, your equal in wickedness, is dead. I killed him. I pushed him into the river, into the arms of your old Mother Gunga, and the crocodiles have taken his body, while his soul has gone down to hell!"

His voice rose to a high falsetto, and he

squeaked mockingly "Sita Ram! Sita Ram! And you, with your unholy vow of silence, you have to keep the secret, a secret between you and me, and the moon and the river, and the crocodiles."

He lurched and fell, scrambled up again, twirled round and ran on, a maniac who alternately danced and ran and fell.

At dawn he was found by some fishermen, lying face downwards, unconscious, life still in his body, but his mind for ever dead.

## CHAPTER XIII

No one in the station thought of connecting the two tragedies. Naturally the judge's fatal accident overshadowed the young missionary's loss of reason. Indeed, few people were even aware that such a person as Harold Williams existed until they heard mention of an unfortunate creature attached to the mission who had suddenly gone mad and had been sent to a lunatic asylum in Bombay pending his shipment to England under adequate escort.

Poor Mr. Taverner's death was quite another matter. It was known that of late he had been in bad health, even more silent, more dreamy than usual, and many small proofs were recalled of his increasing peculiarities during the last few weeks. Two ladies remembered how, when out driving one evening, they had met him meandering in the direction of the river, for all the world as if he were walking in his sleep! It could only

be assumed that, strolling forth, as it was known he had done on the night of his death, he had strayed absent-mindedly down to the river and had fallen into the water. Traces had been found. No living creature would have a chance of surviving in that part of the river, where crocodiles were known to swarm.

The whole thing was too tragic and dreadful for words!

One and all showed sympathy and kindness towards the poor young widow, who naturally was prostrate from the shock. It was common knowledge that she had had much to put up with. Mr. Taverner was so unlike other people -an ill-assorted couple. Who could blame the unfortunate girl if she had amused herself? There was really no harm in pretty, silly Mrs. Taverner. Her indiscretions were unanimously condoned, especially as it had become known by this time that Captain Radgement had unexpectedly inherited a large fortunenot only a fortune, but a title into the bargain! He was going home at once to settle up his affairs. Mrs. Beasley wondered, so did Mrs. Wiseman and all the rest of them, if eventually— But, as they agreed, once a man in that sort of position found himself at home in London, friendships of such a description were apt to fizzle out. In England Mrs. Taverner's attractions would be nowhere, though no doubt in India they were above the average. Young bachelors were only human, and, of course, Mrs. Taverner being of a flirtatious disposition, etc., etc. Of course, she would follow him home and do her best to pin him down, but if ever she became Lady Radgement—well, they would all be surprised. Still, it might come about.

Thus the talk at the club, on the public tennis ground, and in drawing-rooms, while Elaine shut herself up, racked with remorse, sick in body and spirit, ever reproaching herself for having allowed Arnold to go past her on that terrible night, for having made no attempt to stay the nocturnal wandering that had led to his death. Not even Dick could give her comfort—not even Dick.

She saw Dick once before his departure for England, struggled up from her bed to receive him in response to his urgent entreaties for an interview. It was a painful meeting. She lay on the sofa, wan and white, a ghost of herself; and Dick felt awkward, a stranger; he did not know what to say. He craved her forgiveness, wanted so badly to tell her that he was going home only to wait for her, to long for her, that no one, nothing else, could ever matter in his life.

He talked incoherently, artificially, and Elaine made no effort to help him. She was beyond effort, almost beyond feeling. Somehow she and Dick seemed to be on different planes. As he told her of his plans she listened, but his words hardly touched her understanding. He said he had arranged to start that night by the down mail from Bombay. There had been difficulty about his leave, but that was got over in view of the urgency of his claim. Apparently there was much for him to do in the way of business connected with the old man's estate, since he was left sole executor.

Then he asked her what she intended to do. Was she coming home when the rains were over?

She made a vague gesture, said wearily:

"Oh, I don't know. I can't think about anything. I believe there is a lot for me to do too."

For a space neither of them spoke. All day it had been raining heavily; now the downpour had ceased, and a burst of fierce sunshine sucked moisture from the slaked garden. Frogs and crickets made shrill merriment outside. Every door stood open, and the damp air, wafted to and fro within the drawing-room by the steady swaying of the punkah, created a pleasant coolness.

Dick Radgement looked sadly at the figure on the sofa—such a pathetic, frail little figure, like a sick child. He ached to take her in his arms, to comfort and support her, to assure her of his undying devotion. How wretched he felt, what a failure! Then, maddened with sorrow and the agony of leaving her, he broke down.

She rose from the sofa, no longer a poor, piteous object, but a woman, tender, distressful, full of compassion for the man who held her heart. She laid a hand on his shaking shoulders.

## The Vow of Silence

"Oh, Dick, my dear, my dear! You know I can't do without you! Only I must have time. You must wait—"

They looked into each other's eyes, and a silent understanding, a precious consoling, softened their farewell.

## CHAPTER XIV

On a chill spring evening, some eighteen months later, Sir Richard and Lady Radgement sat by a fragrant log fire in the library of the fine old country house that comprised a part of Sir Richard's unexpected inheritance.

The room displayed signs of recent renovation that yet had not interfered with its old-world atmosphere. During the young couple's absence on their honeymoon in the South of France the whole place had been given over to experts renowned in the art of restoration, for the reason that the former owner had lived, miser-like, in one corner of the mansion for half a century, heedless of the increasing and deplorable decay that surrounded him.

Now valuable old family portraits, cleaned and restored, looked down from the walls; rare books in priceless bindings gleamed from the tall brass-fitted cases that reached to the ceiling; the Jacobean furniture, polished and repaired, shone comfortably, as though grateful for long-needed attention. A tea-table, resplendent with antique silver, separated the lately married pair, and as a correct manservant left the room, closing the door quietly behind him, Elaine looked about her with a rapturous sigh of contentment.

She and Dick had just returned from a long motor drive, and she felt pleasantly tired. Sometimes she could scarcely believe that it was all not a wonderful dream. But truly here she was, Dick's wife and superlatively happy, quite apart from their unassailable prosperity.

They were extraordinarily rich. She had everything that the heart of woman could crave. Yet without Dick all the rank and the luxury, her jewels, her costly clothing, would have been worthless to her. Dick was her world, her idol. Had he been penniless it would have made no difference.

"Dick!" she said softly, adoration in her voice.

He looked up from a pile of letters that

had come in with the tea tray—the "second post."

"Well?" His eyes met hers fondly, and he added, "Here is your dâk."

She took the envelopes from his outstretched hand absently, without attention.

"I was just thinking. Isn't it all heavenly!"

"More than heavenly, darling. Give me some tea."

"Are we really here together, with nothing that can possibly part us?"

"Yes, we are really here safely together; but if you don't give me my tea I shall leave the room and go and ask for it in the servants' hall."

With a happy little smile she busied herself over the teapot, handed him hot muffins, helped herself, and turned over her letters.

"One from step-mamma," she said, opening it and glancing at the contents. "As usual—begging. The church wants a new altar cloth, and Dad's pants are all worn out."

"Send her a cheque," Dick advised carelessly. "That will stop her mouth for the time being."

"But we sent her one only the other day, to pay for a new wheelbarrow and seeds for the garden."

"That wouldn't affect altar cloths or pants. What does it matter? We have more money than we know what to do with."

"Yes, I know; but it is so difficult to get used to it, and they try to impose upon us so."

"Who else have they got to impose upon? Look on it as a sort of revenge for all you suffered as a kid. Step-mamma must hate to be beholden to you, even while she doesn't hesitate to ask."

"Very well," said Elaine, proudly magnanimous. "I will send her a cheque; but don't blame me if we have to go into the workhouse!"

"No, I promise you I won't. Who is your Indian letter from? I hate missives from India! The sight of them reminds me of all the awful times we went through out there."

"You didn't hate the sight of my letters, I hope, before I came home?" she inquired with mock concern.

"Silly!—which I have heard defined as the feminine of stupid."

"You are clever, aren't you?" Elaine retaliated, with a stagey, derisive laugh.

Then, as she opened the fat envelope, which was addressed to Mrs. Taverner and re-directed, and something white fell out on to her lap, she exclaimed in her natural voice:

"Good gracious! Talk of reminders! It's from Mrs. Cartmell—a sort of prehistoric peep!"

She proceeded to read aloud:

"MY DEAR MRS. TAVERNER,—I am taking the liberty of sending you a specimen of the new kind of needlework that our class of Christian girls are attempting. I hope it will reach you safely. I have directed it to c/o your agents, which address, I have discovered, you left with the post office when you went home. It is possible that you may still feel some interest in our undertakings, though your path in life may by now have diverged far from your Indian associations. But if you could see your way to enlisting the sympathies of your friends in England with

our work it would be of the utmost assistance to us. By the way, we have so often wondered what has become of poor young Mr. Williams. His breakdown was truly tragic! Such an earnest soul, though in some ways misguided, and physically he was totally unfitted for the work that was demanded of him. I know that at the time of his final illness you were in such deep and lamentable trouble yourself that you may not have heard how he was sent home from Bombay certified as a hopeless lunatic. The expense of it all to the mission was serious, but that, of course, could not be helped. Since then we have had no news of him. . . . ."

Lady Radgement broke off and looked across the tea-table at her husband.

"Oh, Dick!" she said distressfully, "that poor little man! I had forgotten all about him, and I—and I—"

She felt unable to continue, for the spirit of the ardent young missionary seemed to her to be present, disturbing the peace of the quiet, dignified room, calling reproach for her forgetfulness, reminding her that she had trifled with his passions for her own selfish,

frivolous amusement, recalling to her memory that distracting moment when Arnold had paced past her to his death, unconscious of her nearness, unsuspecting of her treachery. She could see him now, his head bent, his hands clasped behind his back, his shortsighted eyes staring vacantly ahead. She knew well enough that it was Harold Williams whom she had to thank for her resistance to an overpowering temptation that night; it was due to Harold Williams, to his innocent trust in what was best in her nature, that she was Dick's wife with at least so much credit to her conscience. But now that very same credit was counteracted by the guilty recognition that she had helped to precipitate disaster for the one human being who had awakened her sense of right and wrong. And what reparation could she make?

"Sent home from Bombay certified as a hopeless lunatic." The words beat through her brain. No one had told her; she had never asked. Her mind had been so full at the time of poor Arnold, and Dick, and her own painful situation. There was no room for anything else. She had shut herself away from

all outside news. And the last time she saw him he had seemed so much better, quite cheerful, so pleased with the flowers and the milk pudding she had brought him. She even visualized the green china dish that had contained the milk pudding, and recalled how the khansamah had reproached her for not bringing it back.

Excuses multiplied for her neglectfulness in making no inquiries. Mrs. Cartmell had been so unpleasant and censorious, and she herself had felt so ill, so devitalized by the shock of Arnold's tragic death and all that it entailed. Yet she writhed under the knowledge that the excuses were false. "Hopeless lunatic." Where was he? Who was taking care of him? She could never rest till she knew.

Dick's voice broke in on her mental torture.

"Hallo! what's up?" he inquired, regarding her anxiously, surprised at her sudden silence and obvious agitation.

"Oh, I feel awful!" she whispered; "as if I were to blame."

"My dear child, what do you mean?

Surely you can't imagine for one moment that you had anything to do with that poor little parson going dotty?"

"But that's just how I do feel! Oh, Dick, it's so hard to explain. I flirted with him, I know I did! And he never understood. He believed in me so implicitly. He said, 'I know if you did anything wrong you would be sorry,' and that was what made me-why I refused to run away with you that night when Arnold-You remember?"

"I remember that you behaved like the little saint that you are! But why rake it all up again? You decided as you thought right, while I, brute that I was, tried to persuade vou otherwise."

She began to cry despairingly. "It seems so dreadful," she sobbed, "that here I am, with you, and everything, I who have been so thoughtless and wicked, while he, who was so good, should be shut up, goodness knows where, perhaps badly treated. I think he was poor and friendless. Supposing he is able to look back at all!"

"Darling," said Dick, with benevolent

impatience, "this is all rot, you know. Try to pull yourself together. You are over-tired; perhaps we motored too far this afternoon."

She shook her head in mute contradiction.

"Mad people are always well cared for in England," he went on reassuringly.

"But I want to make certain. I feel I must know," declared Elaine, mopping her eyes. "I can't bear to think of it. He was so keen on his work, and he meant to do such a lot of good. That it should all have come to nothing like this!"

"Well," said Dick awkwardly, searching his mind for some argument that might lessen her qualms, "if you really think he did put you off—I mean helped you somehow to hold out against me that night, I suppose one might say that he did do some good in the world."

"But, good heavens, he didn't come out to India for that!" was her querulous protest, "and live with those awful Cartmells to be half starved and bullied just to prevent a selfish woman from taking a false step."

"How do you know? I'm sure you are

much more important than any native convert."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense! You can't understand in the least how I feel about it. I shall never forgive myself!"

"Dear child, believe me, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. If he had never met you it would have been just the same. The poor little beggar could never have stood the life: it must have broken him sooner or later. But, if you like, we'll start making inquiries at once as to his whereabouts, and if we can do anything for him-why, of course it shall be done."

"His old aunts lived in our village—but they are both dead, I think."

"They must have had a lawyer or somebody who knew about their affairs. Ask your stepmother to find out. Make the cheque a bigger one, so that she'll feel she must do what you want in return."

"Yes, that's a good idea. Dick, you are good!" she added remorsefully. "I'm sorry I was so cross-forgive me? "

She held out her hand, and he kissed it.

# The Vow of Silence

"Anything to please you, old lady," he said, with fond indulgence, "and I hope it won't prove a wild-goose chase. If it comes to the worst we must try and track him from Bombay, no expense spared!"

### CHAPTER XV

"What a place!" Lady Radgement shivered as the motor drew up at the door of a gaunt grey building on the outskirts of a small, north-country town. "Nobody could be expected to recover in a prison like this!"

"Try not to worry till we know," urged her husband; "and if he is here no doubt we can get him moved—send him south, where there is some chance of sunshine and more cheerful surroundings."

He helped his wife from the car, and slipping a coin into the palm of the hallporter, demanded to see the secretary of the institution.

"Have you an appointment, sir?" inquired the man respectfully.

No; they had no appointment, but they were anxious to ascertain if a gentleman in whom they were interested was an inmate, and, if so, they wished to see him.

Presently they were ushered into a severe-

looking little office, where a portly individual received them politely and invited them to be seated.

"You wish to see one of our patients?" He ran his finger down a long list of names entered in a big book. "Harold Williams, you said? Yes; number 145."

Sir Richard rose and looked over the bulky shoulder.

"That is the name. For some time we have been trying to trace him. We have come a long way. If we could see him without unnecessary delay we should be grateful."

"Quite so. I will ascertain."

The secretary left the office, to return a few minutes later looking doubtful.

"There is a visitor with him at present, and I am afraid it is against our rules to allow more than one a day; a general precaution, as you can understand, against over-excitement."

"Who is the visitor?" asked Lady Radgement quickly. "Any relation?"

"Oh, no! We understood when we received him that he had no relations. It is -

a Mrs. Josiah Cotton, the wife of one of our most prominent townsmen—just an old friend. She is a very kind lady, most charitable, and she comes every week to see the poor fellow. May I ask if you are relations?"

"No; but we are very anxious to see him. We could wait. If it wouldn't be bad for him, do please try to make an exception in our favour."

The secretary glanced out of the window at the big motor, looked the handsome, welldressed visitors up and down.

"Please!" repeated the lady; and her beautiful, beseeching face, her becoming furs, the glimmer of pearls at her neck all helped to conquer official opposition.

"Well, of course we do make exceptions occasionally, according to circumstances. Your poor friend is perfectly harmless, and a visitor more or less would not signify in his case."

The couple tendered their thanks, repeated that for weeks they had been making inquiries as to where Mr. Williams might be found, sparing no effort; and the secretary pressed an electric bell.

"I feel bound to inform you," he continued, "that there is no hope of a cure."

An attendant in uniform answered the bell. The man said that Mrs. Cotton had just left room No. 145, and was at that moment descending the stairs. He was bidden to take "this lady and gentleman" up to Mr. Williams.

Dick and Elaine followed their guide along an echoing corridor, and came face to face, at the foot of a stone staircase, with a slight, quietly-dressed young woman. She had white eyelashes and a gentle, though rather expressionless, face.

On an impulse Elaine accosted her.

"Are you Mrs. Cotton—Mr. Williams's friend?" she asked diffidently.

The other gave a stiff, surprised little bow of admission.

"We knew him in India," went on Elaine, with nervous haste. "We only heard about him quite lately—it is so dreadfully sad! We want to find out if there is anything we can do."

"I fear"—Mrs. Cotton spoke coldly, for the worldly appearance of this stranger shocked her while rousing a vague, instinctive jealousy in her breast—"that there is nothing further anyone can do. Fortunately for him, he seems quite happy in his—his forgetfulness, and I can assure you he is well tended."

"Does he know you-recognize you?"

Mrs. Cotton shook her head sadly. "Not yet; some day, perhaps, one never knows—but I think, I hope, that if he ever recognizes anyone again, it will be me."

With another stiff little bow she passed on towards the entrance, and the Radgements climbed the stone staircase, traversed passages, till a door was opened by the attendant.

Standing expectant on the threshold, they looked into a neat little private room, and beheld a figure seated cross-legged on a low bedstead.

Lady Radgement stepped forward; her husband followed close; the attendant stood sentinel in the doorway.

"Mr. Williams, don't you remember me?" Elaine spoke softly, persuasively.

The deep blue eyes that looked up at her held no recognition. A thin hand was ex-

tended, and a high-pitched, unnatural voice made answer:

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

Elaine took the hand, to stroke it with tender pity.

"No, not Sita Ram—Mrs. Taverner—Elaine. Try to remember!"

"Sita Ram!" he cried again; and then, louder and louder: "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

As Lady Radgement turned in tearful distress to her husband the attendant intervened.

"Best let him alone, madam," he said sympathetically. "He never says nothing else, never a word, and he is ever so contented, eats and sleeps a treat, makes no trouble, like some of the rest of 'em; and Mrs. Cotton, she finds all his little extras, as well as his private room. He wants for nothing."

Dick drew his weeping wife out into the passage, and as the attendant closed the door Harold Williams called after them cheerfully:

"Sita Ram! Sita Ram!"

Blindly, helplessly, Elaine clung to Dick as they re-traversed the long passage and went down the stairs. She was shaken, overcome, by the poignancy of her feelings, a passion of pity, bitter self-recrimination.

Yet, for her, what measureless mercy that she was spared further knowledge—never to know that the harmless, demented human being seated cross-legged, Buddha-wise, on his low bedstead crying, "Sita Ram! Sita Ram!" had, in his madness, set her free to marry Dick, the one love of her life!

The only living creature who could have revealed the truth was a fakir, a "devilworshipper," far away by the waters of the Ganges; and he, save for permission to utter the name of his god, was bound by his vow of silence. PRINTED BY
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